

PATTI SMITH AND A TRADITION OF GENERIC TRANSGRESSION IN  
WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THESIS

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Master of ARTS

by

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## DEDICATION

To my brother, Clayton Thomas, who has taught me the meaning of family in every sense of the word. It was growing up with you that I developed a love for classic rock, the music that shakes the world. And it is you who I am unable to define myself without, even if words themselves tell me I should be able to do so.

*Moderately slow*  
*Times 1 & 2:*

1 I, can't see - ing all a - round it's  
2 one I was on my way - Thanks to you, I'm  
made it - I got for each a piece - and stay

Ramble on, my brotha. Keep on a'ramblin' on.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The biological one: Dad / Mom / Clay / Grandma / Grandpa / Mimi / ET / et al.

You have given me my moral compass, and you have instilled within me the desire to traverse my own frontier. Your support as I have done so is invaluable. I love you all more than you know.

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Thank you to Sonia, who taught me to be a student. And who inspires me, every day, to explore *my* frontier. Ain't nobody said I can't do that

To Tina Zigon, whose brilliant thesis about Beat women's life writings most certainly helped carve the path for this one about Patti Smith Ms Zigon: thank you for paving the road so that others such as myself might travel on it

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## PREFACE

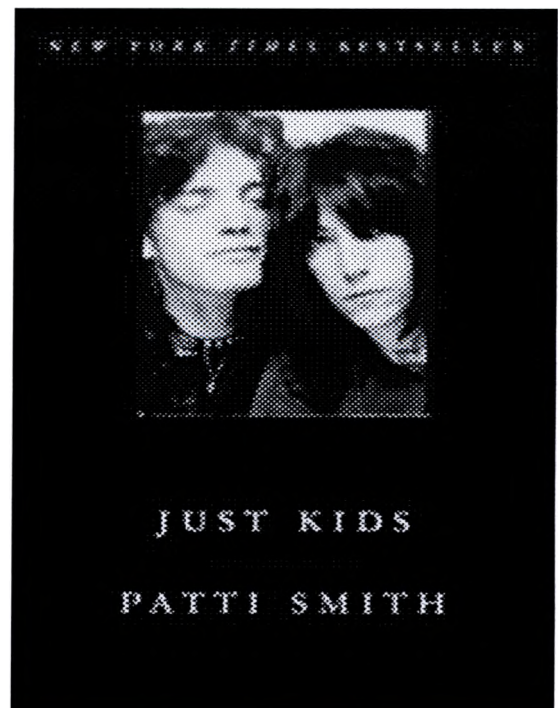
### HOW I CAME TO KNOW OF PATTI SMITH

As Thurston Moore, singer-songwriter and guitarist of the punk rock band Sonic Youth, describes her, Patti Smith “was, and is, pure experience [ . . . She] seemed to exist from a void. I’d hear tales of romance, the girl with the blackest hair hanging out at recording sessions writing poetry. But I didn’t know her. I could only embrace the identity I perceived. I was impressionable and she came on like an alien” (51).

Though I did not come to know of Patti Smith in the same way Moore did, “in 1975 in a magazine,” I did come to know of her through writing—albeit my experience was with her own writing, via her 2010 book *Just Kids*, and she “seemed to exist from a void” to me, as well. When I began the book, I had never heard the first poem Smith recorded with a musical background track, “Piss Factory,” nor had I heard “Gloria: In Excelsis Deo,” the first track on her debut album, which begins magnificently with the words “Jesus died for somebody’s sins / but not mine.” When I watched Gilda Radner’s *Saturday Night Live* character, Candy Slice, in her series of “Candy Slice and the Slicers” skits, I never recognized that Radner did anything more than poke fun at female musicians; I had no idea Radner was using Smith as a reference. When I looked at books of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, I never recognized Smith as anyone other than

one of his models. I had never heard Smith's rendition of "My Generation," or her reinterpretation of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," which she performs "as an Appalachian ballad" (Traynor 1). I had never read any of her poetry, and I did not know about her "reign in the '70s as a street-hot rock & roll messiah" (Moore 51). How I missed pop culture references to her throughout my entire life, I do not know. But I did.

In fact, when I found *Just Kids* in a Tyler, Texas, Barnes & Noble location, what initially drew me to the book was that the front-cover photo included Robert Mapplethorpe. In the photo, he nuzzles his chin and cheek into the hair of a woman and, through squinted eyes, gazes down at her. He wears a bulky choker with silver beads on it, and from that adornment dangles another necklace. He looks as I always expect him to: thoughtful and provocative and composed. His hair is combed in the most perfect waves. The shadows on his cheekbones give off an air of royalty. The female subject of this front-cover photo sits lower in the frame than Mapplethorpe. This blocking position allows backlighting to come through her hair, making it clear that it is ruffled—both by his presence, his nudging, and, if the out-of-place curls at the *top* of her head are of any testament, maybe even by herself. A tic of frustration, perhaps, or maybe of comfort. Maybe she's so relaxed that she doesn't notice—or if she notices, she doesn't care—



Patti Smith's *Just Kids* (paperback)



that her hair is messed up. One of her eyes is almost completely obscured by a curtain-like swoop of her bangs. She wears a piece of intricate jewelry, too, though this one looks more like it's made of feathers and fine strands of silver. The shadows on her face make her mouth look bulky, as if she has jowls. She stares into the camera. She is Patti Smith

To me, she is a *tabula rasa*. I turn over the paperback and see another photo of Mapplethorpe and the woman, this alien creature. This time they are kissing. I wonder, *Who are you, Patti Smith?*

So I read her book And I find out.

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*One of the greatest things that can be said about Patti Smith, I think, is that although she was either an inventor or a precursor of punk (depending on how you look at it), it rapidly bored her and she moved on. She couldn't be contained by any movement or ethos or ism, and anyway was always closer to being Rimbaud or Ginsberg than to being Billy Idol (or, for that matter, Joan Jett), and by the early '80s she was married and living in suburban Detroit. Her great triumph was not that she was a female rock revolutionary, or that she left music for a domestic life, or that she came back to it when that domestic life ended. It was that she never questioned her right to live her life exactly as she saw fit, to make it up as she went along.*

*- Andrew O'Hehir*

## INTRODUCTION

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF (GENDER-BOUND) LIFE WRITING NARRATIVES

The only sufficient way to introduce this academic discussion about Patti Smith and her book *Just Kids* is to acknowledge the fact that only a very few scholarly articles have *ever* been written about Smith, and none of them focuses on *Just Kids* or even the later period of Smith's career. Instead, scholars who have studied Smith and her work view both Smith and her work as she/it was during the prime of her/its fame in the 1970s and '80s. For critiques that pertain directly to *Just Kids*, I am limited to using articles and reviews of the book that have been published in popular, and not scholarly, outlets. Specifically, I wish to view *Just Kids* in terms of scholarship concerning three distinct categories of life writing narrative: biography, autobiography, and memoir. Ultimately, I hope to bring my readers to a greater understanding of the functions of Smith's book and make up for some of the critical shortcomings I see in non-academic readings of *Just Kids*. Most importantly, I aim to show that Patti Smith re-constructs the historical framework of these life writing genres by overthrowing their inherently masculine-oriented traditions and re-casting them so that they are grounded in the life of a woman instead of the life of a man.

I compare Smith's book to another example of women's life writing, Diane di Prima's 1969 *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Both texts include a similar spatiotemporal framework, or the same chronotope, which I name the chronotope of the artistic frontier.

Chronotope literally means "time-space," and it is expressed in literature as a "topological pattern in the artistic work that possesses the characteristics of a semantic field or grid" (Montgomery 5-6). The chronotope of the artistic frontier, which I develop more fully in Chapter One, manifests as Smith and di Prima write about similar times, places, people, and events, as they work to become artists. The artistic frontier "references real-life situations rife with everyday associations for audiences, helping to create a sense of shared space" (6). The chronotopic circumstances found in *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* lead the authors to similar outcomes: artistic careers.

Michael Montgomery reminds us that M. M. Bakhtin, who borrowed the term from Einstein's theory of relativity, first identified the concept of a chronotope in literature. "One of Bakhtin's express purposes in developing the chronotope in the first place is to work past conceptions of genres he perceives as being too limiting to explore the more fundamental [ ] patterns from which works take their shape and which permit them to be understood and analyzed as cultural artifacts" (7). I do not intend to suggest that the artistic frontier manifests only in women's writing, though ultimately my discussion of the artistic frontier in Smith and di Prima's books will allow us to see beyond the limiting, gendered traditions of life writing. Montgomery reminds us that Bakhtin identified the "ancient [..] autobiography" as one of the three most significant types of ancient writing, and that this kind of text "treated [ ] the career of a 'public man'" (12). I argue that if we study the artistic frontier in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Just*

*Kids*, we can “work past [our conception] of [autobiography]” as a structure intended to tell a man’s life story. Indeed, as I will show through my discussion of the chronotope, a woman can also perform a story of herself that aligns with definitions of autobiography; the genre is capable of telling the story of a “public [wo]man.” As Smith and di Prima perform their stories of how they became artists, their writing exhibits a shared spatiotemporal plane, the frontier, in which they become artists. And in turn, they inscribe themselves as the central subjects of their books.

However, this particular chronotopic space eventually disappears from *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. If we were to literally rip out the pages of the books within which the chronotope of the artistic frontier manifests, we would not rip every page out of either text; we would only tear out the “middle” of each book. In both *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Just Kids*, the pages within which the chronotope manifests tell a narrative about the authors working to become artists, and these narratives read as memoirs; however, they also tell stories of how the authors became “public [wo]m[e]n.” The pages leading up to and away from the artistic frontier, though, do not engage in the discourse of memoir in either text. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, the pages we would not rip out suggest that the book is actually di Prima’s autobiography. In *Just Kids*, the pages left over also suggest that Smith constructs an autobiography of herself; additionally, she composes a biography of Robert Mapplethorpe. What we find, then, is a tradition of generic transgression in women’s life writing. di Prima and Smith actively engage in restructuring the formal elements of the life writing genres, particularly as those genres traditionally concern an author’s gender.



Life writing is, of course, writing that is about real-world, historically bound subjects. Of the three life writing genres that I mentioned previously, biography developed first. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines “biography” as “A written account of the life of a particular person from birth to death that attempts not only to elucidate the facts about that person’s life and actions but also to draw a coherent picture of a self, personality, or character” (40). *The Bedford Glossary* traces the biographical genre’s development to “Ancient Greek and Roman biographers,” historians, who, “with some exceptions, were more interested in depicting an individual’s character than in chronicling the straightforward facts of his life” (40). That is, ancient historians used biography as a tool by which they might give character sketches of the public figures whose actions shaped the outcomes of events that the historians then re-told. With the advent of enlightenment values that aim for the acquisition of knowledge through the discovery of objective truths, the biographical genre evolved such that examples of the form are now “grounded in research and are dispassionate in tone” (41). Over time, then, biography has developed from a discourse that once served a specific and singular, usually metaphorical, rhetorical function, to add a relatable character into a larger narrative re-telling of history, into a discourse that is now decidedly scholarly and academic inasmuch as contemporary biographers consider a range of sources to inform their works about biographical subjects.

In contrast, autobiography developed out of the tradition of biography, and it is defined as “A narrative account typically written by an individual that purports to depict his or her life and character” (32). That *The Bedford Glossary* uses the word “purports” within this definition is significant. “Serious” and “dispassionate” biography, the

*Glossary* tells us, describes its subject in third-person pronouns, but autobiography inscribes its subject using the first-person pronoun “I” (32). Autobiography, then, is different in that its subject performs a narrative about itself that is “written expressly for a public audience” and therefore could be self-censorious and/or self-congratulating (32). Because of the reflexive nature of the discourse within which an author inscribes him- or herself into existence, the autobiographical subject necessarily becomes at once both the subject and the object of his/her own critical gaze and is allowed the “possibility of political opposition based on testimonial and confessional forms of writing as forms of resistance” (Gilmore 41). In Smith and di Prima’s texts, the authors resist the gendered tradition of life writings. In turn, “[a]utobiography criticism,” as Leigh Gilmore explains, “determines the ‘value’ of any autobiographer’s ‘truth’ [by] participat[ing] in the political production and maintenance of the category of ‘identity’” (80). Clearly, the definition for “autobiography” is a loose one that must be adjusted on a text-by-text basis. Still, “in the strict sense of the term,” a conservative definition of autobiography is, as Roy Pascal writes, that the genre “is [a] retrospective, coherent, and holistic shaping, the imposition of a pattern upon a life” (qtd. in Jelinek 2).

Just as autobiography arose from the generic traditions of biography, memoir as we know it came from autobiography, and it is the youngest established genre of life writing to have developed. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the first recorded use of “memour” dates to 1494 and signifies “a note, a memorandum; a record; a brief testimonial or warrant” (1). The word did not come to mean “records of events of history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer” until 1659, and its definition still did not always signify a form of life writing; in 1711, the word denoted

“something kept in memory of someone; a memento” (1). Currently, as *The Bedford Glossary* notes, “memoir” is defined as “a narrative account typically written by an individual that depicts things, persons, or events the individual has known” (258). Or, in Roy Pascal’s words, a memoir is not a work about its author but is instead a “work about others” (qtd. in Jelinek 2). A memoir, then, requires nothing more than its author’s own recollection of a particular moment in his/her life. Memoir is *not* an academic pursuit like biography, and a memoirist does *not* have to impose “a pattern upon [his/her] life” because the memoirist does *not* perform the entire story of his/her life, but instead performs merely a *part* within his/her life.

In Chapter Three of this thesis, I discuss a “kaleidoscope” symbol that appears throughout *Just Kids* which can, indeed, be read as “the imposition of a pattern upon [Smith’s] life.” And I will develop in more detail how *Just Kids* includes a biography of Mapplethorpe and an autobiography of Smith. She does compose a memoir, too, inasmuch as she spends two chapters writing about her time in New York with Robert Mapplethorpe between 1969 and 1971. But she also composes her autobiography, from birth to the present. Additionally, she composes a biography of Mapplethorpe that spans his entire life. I define these genres because writers and reviewers who critique *Just Kids* for popular periodicals don’t seem to make these distinctions; they all call the book a memoir. And in doing so, I believe they ignore what Smith actually accomplishes in her book by limiting the scope of their readings.

As I show in Chapter Two, Diane di Prima composes only an autobiography of herself within *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. On the other hand, with *Just Kids* Patti Smith writes a biography of Robert Mapplethorpe that exists altogether separately from and alongside

her autobiography. Though di Prima she works at transgressing genres, our discussion of di Prima's text serves primarily as a lens for our discussion of Smith's *Just Kids*.

Eventually, once the chronotope ceases to manifest within the book, Smith and Mapplethorpe are not together anymore, the book no longer reads as a memoir, and Smith implies that Mapplethorpe's biography exists because her own, autobiographical story necessitates it. In order for her to tell the story of how she became a "great" subject in her own right, she also must tell how Mapplethorpe became a "great" subject, too. By fusing the discourses of memoir, autobiography, and biography—or by writing an autobiography of herself that exists alongside a biography of Mapplethorpe and therefore does contain some element of a memoir—Smith implies that all three life writing genres can be rooted in the life of a woman (her own life). Another way to say this is that Patti Smith implies a woman can indeed become through language not the named, but the one who names. However, by defining *Just Kids* as a memoir and not as an "Autobiography / Biography," which is actually the classification that the book is marketed as (back cover), reviewers have ignored this transgressive function of Smith's book. That is, Smith fuses the life writing genres together, and in doing so she defies the traditions of them all. How she creates this fusion of the life writing genres—how she defies them in order to re-define them—is the primary concern of this thesis.

Now, an overview of the contemporary writing that does exist about *Just Kids*: at least nine days before its release on January 19, 2010, presses were discussing Smith, "the Punk Prose Poetess," and her new book (Grigoriadis 1). However, these writers were not as concerned with critiquing the book itself as they were with documenting a shift in Patti Smith's public persona. Vanessa Grigoriadis, in her January 10, 2010, *New York*

*Magazine* article, briefly mentions the book and its plot in her article's secondary headline, which proclaims "Patti Smith, along with her friend Robert Mapplethorpe, lived a particular New York dream—the Chelsea Hotel, Max's Kansas City, CBGB, superstardom—to the fullest. Now in a great new memoir, she tells it like it was" (1). But in her article, Grigoriadis does not review the book so much as introduce readers at length to a 63-year-old Patti Smith who still "looks like the same punk-rocker who chanted that Jesus was 'the greatest faggot in history'" but who is no longer simply "a female rock-and-roll star [ . . . and] an anti-feminist feminist icon"; now, Grigoriadis tells us, "[Smith is] willing to repent for some of the dicier declarations" (1). Grigoriadis goes so far as to say, "It's surprising to hear that Smith, the paragon of cool, [has become] so emotional" (1). Similarly, in her January 17, 2010, *New York Times* review of *Just Kids*, Janet Maslin praises the book for "achiev[ing] its aura of the sacrosanct" but informs readers that Smith "uses a memoirist's sleight of hand [ . . . ] cast[ing] off all verbal affectation", Maslin decides that "This Patti Smith [ . . . ] is a newly mesmerizing figure, not quite the one her die-hard fans used to know" (1). As we can see, in reports that preceded the book's publication date, writers specifically pointed out the fact that Patti Smith's public image, and her art, had apparently changed. And their judgments don't imply that seem to be so fond of the switch.

Once *Just Kids* was published, as is to be expected, reviewers began to focus less on Smith herself and more on the text itself—and some of these reviews were scathing. In a January 29, 2010, *New York Times* review, Tom Carson faults Smith's writing in *Just Kids* for "fatuitites," which literally means that Carson believes portions of the book are silly, foolish, and stupid (1). As well, in her February 13, 2010, *Guardian* review,

Elizabeth Day is critical of the fact that “*Just Kids* is dominated by [...] countless mentions of the other important men in Smith's life, most of whom [share] the principal attributes of being French, dead and terribly artistic” (1). Like the pre-publication reviews, Day seems disappointed in Smith. Day argues, “Fortunately both Smith and the book are saved from imploding with self-satisfaction by a chance encounter with a green-eyed boy called Robert Mapplethorpe” (1). And she writes, “The relationship with Mapplethorpe infuses her writing with a necessary human warmth. The knowing references become less frequent and she concentrates instead on crafting a moving and delicately handled dual memoir” (1). It is important for us to note that, at the very least, Day does recognize Smith composes two different stories into *Just Kids*. This suggestion supports my own argument that Smith builds different narratives into her book, even if Day wants to call those narratives memoirs, and I see them as distinct, separate autobiography and biography which create a fusion that looks like a memoir, but is not merely a memoir. However, even if Day doesn't charge Smith with being silly, foolish, or stupid like Carson, she is still highly critical of Smith—as are other reviewers.

In a February 11, 2010, *Slate Magazine* review entitled “Patti Smith, Where's Your Critical Distance?” Julia Felsenthal recalls a moment in Tom Carson's aforementioned *New York Times* review in which he writes that “‘Mapplethorpe himself, despite Smith's valiant efforts, doesn't come off as appealingly as she hopes he will. When he isn't candidly on the make—‘Hustler-hustler-hustler. I guess that's what I'm about,’ he tells her—his pretension and self-romanticizing can be tiresome” (1). Felsenthal argues that “Carson's criticism is well-deserved”; Smith's “greatest asset as a writer is the clarity with which she sees herself and the people around her—a clarity that

is compromised only by a gigantic, Robert Mapplethorpe-shaped blind spot” (1). And in a December 2011 *Huffington Post* book review entitled “10 Rock Star Bios You Shouldn’t Bother Reading,” Brian Boone suggests of the “memoir” that “even if you’re a big Smith fan, you might want to skip it” (1).

These reviews lack cogency in their arguments. Carson, for instance, gives no examples of Smith’s aforementioned “fatuities,” which makes me wonder about his quick usage of such a denigrating word. Felsenthal and Day seem to imply that Smith is a subject who should be looked at with a very discerning eye, almost as if she is not to be trusted, they seem overwhelmingly disappointed that Smith’s representation of herself doesn’t fit into their own ideas about who she is. As a January 15, 2010, group piece published on *NPR*’s website recalls, in an interview with Deborah Amos, Smith said, “Sometimes [people] seem to think I came out of the womb, you know, cursing, with an electric guitar [ . . . ] I think it’s important for people to realize that we were all young, all naive, and also we had lived in a time that had magic” (1). Far from faulting Smith for not writing of herself as “cursing, with an electric guitar,” then, and instead of being angry with her because, in her text, she is “young [ . . . ] naive,” and perhaps even a bit silly, foolish, and stupid, we should accept these premises as facts of the book. It is called *Just Kids*, of course. She tells about her youth in New Jersey and her time in New York with Robert Mapplethorpe between 1969 and 1971 while they are “just kids,” before they became working artists. But she also composes her autobiography, from birth to the present. Additionally, she composes a biography of Mapplethorpe that spans his entire life. It is in composing a text that engages in many discourses at once that Smith transgresses the genre within which she writes.

Let me say this more directly and return to my visual metaphor: if we were to tear out the pages of Smith's book that read like a memoir, we would hold two chapters' worth of text in our hands—the chapters called “Just Kids” and “Hotel Chelsea.” Within this memoir portion of Smith's book, we would see the chronotope of the artistic frontier manifest as a spatiotemporal plane in which Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe become artists in their own right. The pages that we did not rip out of the book would constitute an autobiography of Patti Smith and a biography of Robert Mapplethorpe. If this argument seems bifurcated, remember that bifurcation requires an audience to choose “either/or” from two possible scenarios and therefore creates a false dilemma, I require no such choice from my audience and create no such false dilemma. Instead, I require my audience to accept that Smith's book does many things at once. By fusing the three life writing discourses together, Smith overthrows their limiting, gender-specific traditions.

“St. Augustine's *Confessions*, written in the fourth century A.D.,” is commonly credited as “the first fully developed example of the [autobiographical] genre” (*The Bedford Glossary* 32). The prototypical autobiographical text, then, is one inscribed by a man and professing subjectivity as it is experienced from a male perspective. As Georg Misch reminds us, “The autobiographer should be self-aware, a seeker after self-knowledge. *He* must aim to explore, not to exhort. *His* autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some personal mythos” (qtd. in Jelinek 4, emphasis mine). Misch's definition demonstrates the historical origins of autobiography that position it as a gender-specific genre. But women do write autobiographies, and women are capable of producing and performing a “personal mythos”; however, there is a difference in the way men and women have traditionally constructed themselves through writing using an



autobiographical “I.” Leigh Gilmore writes, “For the most part, feminist critics of autobiography have agreed there is a lived reality that differs for men and women and accounts for much of the difference between men’s and women’s autobiography” (x). Or, according to *The Bedford Glossary*, men’s lives are turned into autobiographical narratives “whose established conventions call for a life-plot that turns on action, triumph through conflict, intellectual self-discovery, and often public renown,” and “women’s lives, for instance, are often characterized by interruption and deferral” (32). In Gilmore’s words, “women represent the self by representing others because that is how women know and experience identity” (xiii). As Gilmore notes, the masculinist framework presents female autobiographers with a resulting challenge to overcome in their writing. As a patriarchal genre, autobiography is not immediately suited to the mechanisms by which women construct themselves in autobiographical discourse

Many feminist critics of autobiography have argued that since women are trained to see themselves as objects because language positions them to be so, women cannot grasp subjectivity with the same ease and technique as men; they must gain subjectivity *through* others to *become* autobiographical subjects; “men are autonomous individuals with inflexible ego boundaries who write autobiographies that turn on moments of conflict and place the self at the center of the drama” and “women, by contrast, have flexible ego boundaries, develop a view of the world characterized by relationships [...] and therefore represent the self in relation to ‘others’” (xiii). Or as Shoshana Felman puts it in her book *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference*, “Unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women’s autobiography is what their memory cannot contain—or hold together as a whole—although their writing inadvertently

inscribes it” (15). That is, women “tell their stories (which they do not know or cannot speak) through others’ stories” (18). A somewhat reductive way to rephrase Gilmore and Felman’s arguments, though, is to say that women’s autobiographies are actually memoirs. This action is what I believe the reviewers and critics who wrote about *Just Kids* for popular presses have done. They literally ignore the transgressive functions of Smith’s book.

In *Just Kids*, it is indeed true that Patti Smith grasps subjectivity through another with her treatment of Robert Mapplethorpe. Again, she tells her own life story while writing a biography of Mapplethorpe, and when the two meet and live together in the text, this part of the book reads as a memoir. However, when Patti Smith writes a biographical portrait of Mapplethorpe that exists alongside her own, separate, autobiographical portrait in the book, she constructs this biographical portrait of him without a single footnote or citation—from her own, subjective standpoint. Smith tells her story through his, and vice-versa. In turn, she fuses together biography, autobiography, and memoir in order to create a hybrid text that challenges the gendered assumptions of those genres. Specifically, in *Just Kids*, Patti Smith re-positions the gendered traditions of life writing so the discourse comes from a female perspective.

Or, to put it another way: original biographers were ancient men who, years after their subjects lived, needed a technology that would allow them to tell histories that included stories about people, and they developed biography as a mechanism by which to turn historical figures into narrative characters. The life writing genres grew from this invention of biography, which especially has turned into an academic pursuit that favors objectivity over subjectivity. In *Just Kids*, Smith plucks the traditional historian, the

ancient man, out of the story of biography and replaces him with herself. She performs a biography of Mapplethorpe that comes from her own, subjective standpoint. And in doing so, she regenerates the terms and conditions upon which a biography—and, therefore, all other modes of life writing—may be built. That is, Patti Smith tears down, throws away, and re-builds life writing within *Just Kids* so that the discourse *is* grounded in a woman's life (her own life) and does not rely on the traditional patriarchal model. The biography in *Just Kids*, of course, is not based on objectivity, but subjectivity, and it spans more time than a memoir would. In rewriting the mythos of biography by performing it from the female subjectivity, Smith re-landscapes the entire plane of life writing. Perhaps we can argue, then, that Smith has created, or continues in the tradition of creating, a new type of life writing altogether. Through studying *Just Kids*, we can come to a greater understanding of this new genre of life writing, a type of discourse for which we do not yet even have a name.

## CHAPTER I

### IN THE CHRONOTOPE OF THE ARTISTIC FRONTIER

In his *New York Times* review of *Just Kids*, Tom Carson argues that the book is the most spellbinding and diverting portrait of funky-but-chic New York in the late '60s and early '70s that any alumnus has committed to print. The tone is at once flinty and hilarious, which figures [Smith has] always been both tough and funny, two real saving graces in an artist this prone to excess. What's sure to make her account a cornucopia for cultural historians, however, is that the atmosphere, personalities and mores of the time are so astutely observed (1).

Additionally, Elizabeth Day in her *Guardian* review praises Smith's construction of "the vivid backdrop of 1970s New York" (1). Critical reviewers of Smith's book such as these point to her capabilities of writing about and re-creating the atmosphere of a specific time and place. What these critics are actually praising is Smith's ability to use the structural mechanism that literary scholars refer to as a chronotope. Within this chapter, I define the chronotope that we can see manifest in *Just Kids*, and I name it the chronotope of the artistic frontier. This frontier, I believe, also appears in Diane di Prima's 1969 book *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. However, my argument in this chapter will go no further than establishing that both Smith and di Prima place their autobiographical subjects within the

same spatial-temporal discursive plane, or within the same chronotopic space that I have named the artistic frontier. Then, in Chapter Two, I discuss the effects of the chronotope of the artistic frontier on our readings of di Prima and Smith's books in terms of scholarly criticism about the gendered nature of the life writing genres. Some of the features of the chronotope of the artistic frontier include real-world artists as characters; struggles with poverty; feelings of alienation, disaffection, and outsidership; among others. I will expand my discussion to identify these features more specifically and in-depth later in this chapter.

M.M. Bakhtin defines the "*chronotope* (literally, 'time space') [as] the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term (space-time) is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity" (84). To understand the concept of a chronotope, we must first understand that a work of literature is an item that exists within space-time and is therefore literally *made* out of the fabric of space-time. Or, as Simon Dentith puts it, "Chronotope [is] a term taken over by Mikhael Bakhtin from 1920s science to describe the manner in which literature represents time and space. In different kinds of writings there are differing chronotopes, by which changing historical conceptions of time and space are realized" (1). As such, the literary chronotope "expresses the inseparability of space and time [... in which time] thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the moments of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). Broadly defined, then, the literary chronotope signifies a specific fragment of space-time that particular types of characters populate and particular events occur within.

For example, one specific chronotope is “the chronotope of the road [...] and of various types of meetings on the road” (Bakhtin 98). Roads exist in literature primarily as historically bound liminal spaces wherein historically bound characters may travel from one place to another and interact with other characters who also do the same. Throughout literature, any given road within any particular text is informed by that text’s existence as a specific, tangible, “piece” of material made from the fabric of space-time. As such, a road in any particular literary text will be constructed in direct response to its author’s own historical situation. Or, as Bakhtin writes, “In the chronotope of the road, the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity” (98). That is, a twelve-lane superhighway will not exist in a text that was written in and takes place during the time of the Romans; likewise, neither will an accurate portrayal of a Roman road, in its exact original incarnation and being used for its original functions, exist in a text that takes place in, say, Los Angeles in the 1990s, where a twelve-lane superhighway might exist. The substance—the fabric of space-time, the material—that makes up a 20<sup>th</sup>-century superhighway drastically differs from the materials and technology that the Romans used to build their roads. Additionally, the characters who occupy a Roman road differ from the characters who occupy a superhighway. The historical moment is the primary determining factor that creates the differences between the superhighway and the Roman road, and history influences the way these constructions are expressed in literature. But each—the superhighway and the Roman road—is a type of road. And in any “road story,” regardless of *where* the road the characters travel exists; and regardless of *when* these characters travel the road; what readers find are similar types of characters—travelers—who find themselves in similar types of situations with similar

types of other characters who are also traveling. These characters all exist within a particular “time space” that serves its own discursive function. The road is a specific *space* that exists within *time*. And in texts that use this particular piece of space-time as their settings, the chronotope of the road becomes a “necessary building block in the creation of [the] litera[ry]” narrative that we casually refer to as a “road story” (1).

Clearly, then, the chronotope of the road becomes in these texts (as in every text in which any chronotope appears) “a generative principle of narrative rather than a product of it” (Ingemark 2). Or, put more simply, if the chronotope of the road manifests in an author’s book as s/he describes a road and populates it with characters, s/he is limited to writing about the kinds of events and characters that appear within that chronotope

This is not to say, though, that authors are aware that they write about chronotopic spaces. Certainly some are. However, we cannot assume here that either Patti Smith or Diane di Prima is aware she uses a chronotopic space within her book. Still, a particular chronotope, the one I am calling the artistic frontier, manifests within each text. As a specific “piece” of space-time that serves its own particular functions, the artistic frontier itself limits the kind of narrative either Smith or di Prima might tell. The chronotope is generative, then, because, even if they are not aware they use the frontier, the concept still informs their texts’ constructions. It is certainly worth noting that both Smith and di Prima place their autobiographical subjects within the same geographic location, in lower Manhattan. However, keep in mind that these similar locations by themselves do not necessarily signify that Smith and di Prima’s books share a chronotopic space. For a chronotope to truly exist, it must not be bound to a specific, real-world geographic location but rather should be transferrable to many locations and time periods. Still, as the

two maps below illustrate, their characters visit—in some cases, such as locations around Washington Square—the exact same places. The first map is of Patti Smith’s New York, and the second is of di Prima’s:



Fig. 1 – Patti Smith’s New York City



Fig. 2 – Diane di Prima’s New York City



As we can see in these maps, which I generated by plotting the specific locales that both Smith and di Prima mention in their books, both Smith and di Prima's textual selves occupy the same geographic area. But to show the interconnectedness of their texts based on their similar geographic locations is only to situate their characters within space—not within time. To determine a chronotope that books share, one must locate the *time* that their narratives share as well, for it is *time* in Bakhtin's definition of the chronotope that actually "takes on flesh" and appears to exist as a tangible element of the narrative within which it is composed. The concept of chronotope, instead, identifies a constructed space within literature that might be found in many different geographical locations and is not just fixed to one particular *spot* on the planet

For clarification, I refer to a passage that occurs toward the end of *Just Kids* so that we can understand the name I have given our chronotope, the artistic frontier, and to explore the specific features of our chronotope. I have named the chronotope based upon a passage that occurs at the end of Patti Smith's book. In this passage, Smith recounts ideas that she and Mapplethorpe often discussed: "The artist seeks contact with his intuitive sense of the gods, but in order to create his work, he cannot stay in this seductive and incorporeal realm. He must return to the material world in order to do his work. It's the artist's responsibility to balance mystical communication and the labor of creation" (256). Shortly thereafter, Smith synthesizes her and Mapplethorpe's ideas: that the artist must travel to different planes, different spaces (and therefore different temporalities), of existence during the process of creation—when she writes about the day of her and Robert Mapplethorpe's "first and last show [art exhibition] together" (257). Remember:

this exhibition comes near the *end* of Smith's text, and we have read for 256 pages *before* this event the story of how Smith and Mapplethorpe came to be artists.

On this day, Smith realizes that she and Mapplethorpe, who have finally become artists whose work may be exhibited in a show, have been traveling through, up until this point in *time* (that is, time as it exists as the reader consumes the book *as well as* the actual narrative time within the text)—their own “universe,” one that “Robert and I [ . . . ] explored” together (257). She calls this “universe” that they “explored,” “the frontier of our work,” and she suggests to us that by exploring this “frontier,” she and Mapplethorpe “created space for each other” (257) so that they might exist in the “material world” as artists whose work can be shown in this exhibition (256-7). We should particularly notice that with this passage, Smith discusses how she and Mapplethorpe also “created [a] space.” Therefore, time and space within this “frontier” are inseparable, a principle that the concept of the literary chronotope relies heavily on

Likewise, in “Afterword—Writing Memoirs,” which she composed in 1987 as an addendum to a new edition of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Diane di Prima comments on her writing process as she created the book. She recalls that “As time went on I got more and more into the book,” and she specifically comments on her experience with “the remembering and re-creating of that earlier time” (192-3). di Prima tells us that in order to recall the mood, the landscape, of “those early fifties in The City,” she “would play Bird, or Clifford Brown, or Miles’ ‘Walking’ over and over as I wrote, and tiny perfect memories of long-forgotten rooms, and scenes, and folks would take me over” (193). Just as how Smith uses *Just Kids* in order to ruminate upon how she became an artist, di Prima also wrote her book *after* she became an established artist and in her book reflects

upon the time when she worked to become one. Subsequently, we find evidence that the chronotope of the artistic frontier, for Smith and di Prima, indeed manifests as a “generative principle” of their writings and not just a product of what they have written. That is, the frontier appears within the two books, to us, as a “set” spatiotemporal plane in which an aspiring artist becomes a working one.

For example, di Prima opens her text with an “Author’s Note” that begins with a question di Prima was asked in 1968 by “a blonde freshman as she drove me back to San Francisco after my reading at Berkeley last year”: “‘What do you suppose happened to all those Beatniks?’” (n.p.). di Prima answers the young woman with, “Well sweetie, some of us sold out and became hippies. And some of us managed to preserve our integrity by accepting government grants, or writing pornographic novels” (n.p.). di Prima recalls that “John Weiners is mad and in makeup in Buffalo. Fred Herko walked out a window, Gary Snyder is a Zen priest. You name it” (n.p.). And in reflecting on what happened to her friends and fellow writers, “all those Beatniks,” di Prima also remembers something that her “eleven-year-old daughter recently said, [...] remembering the early years of her childhood. ‘I really miss those old days. They were hard, but they were beautiful’” (n.p.). di Prima, then, at once responds to the young woman with her own story of what happened to her and, with her daughter, reflects on those previous times. Her reflection is the story of how she came to be one of “those Beatniks.” And it is in di Prima’s reflection that we can find the manifestation of our chronotope of the artistic frontier. “Chapter 1—February” opens with di Prima writing in the past tense that she “awoke to the sounds of morning in the West Village,” and she describes the atmosphere of the room in which she awoke: “the only furniture in the room was made of skids stolen from nearby paper

companies and painted a flat black. They served as both chairs and tables, and no cushions broke the austerity of the furnishings [ . . . ] such as we have become accustomed to in the sixties” (3). At the beginning of this chapter, because of her usage of the past tense and because she describes objects as they were in a time before “the sixties,” before she became an established writer, it is clear that di Prima positions her autobiographical self into the spatiotemporal framework of her artistic frontier. And within this framework, throughout the rest of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima, like Smith, uses her text to tell of how she came to be the writer she is.

A chronotope appears whenever a writer structures time within a framework of space so that the two, which are inseparable, become “tangible” within a text. We can locate the chronotope by pinpointing the space-time that an author has woven into his/her text (Bakhtin 284). A true chronotope will exist relative to any historical era, and it does not necessarily have to be positioned within a particular geographic coordinate. Again, these are the reasons why calling the chronotope that *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* share, for example, “the chronotope of the West Village” isn’t adequate. However, in *Just Kids*, Smith writes that at a particular *time* in her life, before she was famous, she and Robert Mapplethorpe entered a particular spatial plane, a particular *space*, that they existed within and “explored” together, and she calls this space “the frontier of our work” (257). Similarly, di Prima recalls that to write *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, she had to recreate for herself the time and space that she inhabited as she was becoming an artist. Smith suggests that exploring this “frontier of our work” is what allowed her and Mapplethorpe to create a space in which they might become artists, and in di Prima’s book, she also tells of how she became an artist. This frontier, then, manifests in both Smith’s and di

Prima's texts as a specific piece of space-time within which particular events occur that bring an aspiring artist (or, in Smith's case, two aspiring artists) to another space, that of the artistic career, in which the artist must create him/herself while exploring the frontier.

Listed in the chart on the next few pages are specific narrative events that happen to both di Prima and Smith as their autobiographical selves exist in their distinctive texts and thus generate what I am calling the chronotope of the artistic frontier. The list also contains types of characters who populate this chronotope. This list is by *no* means an exhaustive representation of the narrative and characters that occur within the chronotope of the artistic frontier, but because these two texts share these features, we can figure them to be distinctive and characteristic ones that occur within the chronotope of the artistic frontier. Notice that, while I have listed the events in the left column, the one that describes di Prima's book, as moving in chronological time as it is presented within *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, the events that occur within *Just Kids* do not always occur at the same time as they do within di Prima's text, and so the column for *Just Kids* cannot be read as an exact chronology of Smith's narrative. Still, what is important is that the same types of events and the same types of characters (in fact, as in the case of Allen Ginsberg, literally the same character) occur in both pieces of literature even though the books were published 41 years apart and take place about 20 years away from one other. Lastly, in the third column, I name the characteristic features of the chronotope that the paired scenes from Smith and di Prima display:

**TABLE 1:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE  
CHRONOTOPE OF THE ARTISTIC FRONTIER**

<i>Memoirs of a Beatnik</i> by Diane di Prima (1969)	<i>Just Kids</i> by Patti Smith (2010)	Characteristic Feature of the Chronotope
<p>1 di Prima moves to Manhattan from Brooklyn (48) into “a loft that existed as lofts existed only in New York City, and only in the New York of the nineteen-fifties” that is on “the Lower East Side” (74) just as “the East Side was to become the ‘new Village’ [ . . . ] rent[ed] to impoverished young people [ . . . ] who simply wanted a haven, any haven they could afford, within walking distance of the bars, coffee shops and book stores” (75)</p> <p>2. As “the days passed easily—it was a cool, beautiful Spring and the East Side was blooming” (90), di Prima takes care of one of her friends, “John,” who has become very sick (91).</p>	<p>1. Smith decides that she “would seek out friends who were studying at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn,” and she moves to Brooklyn from New Jersey in 1967 (23). After she meets Robert Mapplethorpe, they live in Brooklyn at “160 Hall Street” (43) Eventually, the two move from Brooklyn to Manhattan, to “Room 1017 [ . . . ] in the Chelsea Hotel” (94)</p> <p>2. Mapplethorpe catches an “illness” (86) and becomes very sick, “malnourished with a high fever, trench mouth, impacted wisdom teeth, and gonorrhea” (95) Smith helps him “convalesce” (95).</p>	<p>1. Subject (a to-be artist) moves into a cheap living space within a cultural hub in a big city</p> <p>2. Other characters, possibly other artists, around the subject are underfed/ill</p>

Table 1 contd.

<p>3. Once John is well, she leaves the City for a short period of time to go live elsewhere, in the country (99).</p>	<p>3. Smith leaves the City to visit Paris twice (82, 226). She lives in Acapulco one summer and writes music (186).</p>	<p>3. Subject must leave new home in order to appreciate it</p>
<p>4. di Prima returns to the City and spends "the next few days casing the scene. The city was really crowded; there were, simply, no pads to be had, and rather than hassle I took to sleeping in the park" (114). di Prima lives a homeless existence in New York City</p>	<p>4. When Smith arrives in the City for the first time, she finds herself "sleep[ing] in Central Park" (26) and "beat and hungry, roaming with a few belongings wrapped in a cloth, hobo style" (27) For a few weeks, Smith lives homelessly in New York City</p>	<p>4. Subject lives in dire poverty</p>
<p>5. One day, di Prima recalls, she "wandered into the Quixote Bookstore" and "Norman Verne, the proprietor, offered me a job" (117) She begins working at the bookstore, and she moves into and lives in the store, which "came with a kitchen in the back, complete with stove and refrigerator, and there was an army cot to set up in the middle of the back room, where one could sleep in comparative luxury" (117).</p>	<p>5. Smith "was hired as a cashier in the uptown branch of Brentano's bookstore" (36), and she "took to sleeping in the store [ ..] hid[ing] in the bathroom while the others left, and after the night watchman locked up I would sleep on my coat In the morning it would appear I had gotten to work early" (37). That is, she moves into and lives in the bookstore.</p>	<p>5. Subject gets a job working with art</p>

Table 1 contd.

<p>6 Next, she “rented a pad [...] uptown on 60<sup>th</sup> Street [...] with high ceilings and a fireplace in the large front rooms”; “It was a good pad,” di Prima writes, “because of the size of the front room, because the fireplace worked, and because it cost thirty-three dollars a month” (135) In this new pad, which di Prima opens up for her friends to live in communally, they engage in “woodshedding,” which “is what you do when you hole up and practice your art” (138) She writes, “Woodshedding was pretty much the rule of life at the Amsterdam Avenue pad [ . ] The only thing in the room besides the endless boxes of wood [for the fireplace . .] was an old, unfinished dresser full of our clothes and on top of it a file drawer full of all our collected works. That was about it” (138).</p>	<p>6. While they lived together in Brooklyn, Smith tells us she and Mapplethorpe “sat and drew together. We would get lost for hours” (57). They spend their days “in the continual transformation of our living space,” which itself becomes, to them, an artistic medium that they might manipulate (50). Later, at the Hotel Chelsea, Smith and Mapplethorpe live in “a doll’s house in the Twilight Zone, with a hundred rooms, each a small universe” (112). That is, at the Hotel Chelsea they live and work within a community of other artists who live and work there, and “everyone had something to offer” (112).</p>	<p>6 Subject lives in a communal “pad” space with other artists</p>
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Table 1 contd.

<p>7. "Meanwhile, in the outside world," di Prima writes, "everything was changing faster and more than we realized" (173). And just as the art her friends make begins showing signs that her friends themselves are growing as artists, such as "Pete's fantasy paintings bec[oming] eight feet wide and gloomier," di Prima "put together <i>This Kind of Bird Flies Backward</i>, my first book of poems, and Pete and Leslie solemnly assured me that it could not be published because no one would understand a word of the street slang" (173)</p>	<p>7. Smith recalls that "Often I'd sit and try to write or draw, but all of the manic activity in the streets, coupled with the Vietnam War, made my efforts seem meaningless [. . .] I wondered if anything I did mattered" (65) She watches Mapplethorpe develop as an artist, and she documents his "transformation" (79) as he "glimpsed the future he had so resolutely sought and worked so hard to achieve" (176) Smith begins "writing [. . .] pieces for rock magazines" (178), she co-authors a play, <i>Cowboy Mouth</i>, with Sam Shepard (185), she publishes a "small collection of poems, a chapbook called <i>Kodak</i>" (195), another book of poetry called "<i>Seventh Heaven</i>" (200), and even another book called "<i>Witt</i>" (223) She begins singing in a band that "booked time at Jimi Hendrix's studio, Electric Lady" recording music (241).</p>	<p>7. World around the subject is in apparent chaos; subject experiences struggle between interior, personal desires and exterior, societal expectations</p>
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Table 1 contd.

<p>8. di Prima is given a copy of <i>Howl</i> by Allen Ginsberg. She reads it, and “The phrase ‘breaking ground’ kept coming into my head [...] For I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing. All the people who, like me, had hidden and skulked, writing down what they knew for a small handful of friends [ . ] would now step forward and say their piece [ . ] I was about to meet my brothers and sisters. We had come of age” (176) Later, she meets Ginsberg and Kerouac, and she creates a friendship with them (180).</p>	<p>8. Smith meets Allen Ginsberg, who mistakes her “‘for a very pretty boy,’” and he mentors her in writing (123) She also meets other mid-twentieth century artists such as Gregory Corso and William Burroughs, and these artists also teach her how to write (138). She meets “the guy in <i>Don’t Look Back</i>. The other one Bobby Neuwirth, the peacemaker-provocateur Bob Dylan’s alter ego” (141), who challenges her to write songs (142) Additionally, she meets and becomes close with Janis Joplin (158), Andy Warhol, and Tennessee Williams, among other artists and writers (165)</p>	<p>8. Characters in the text—including the subject—exist on the cusp of artistic careers</p>
<p>9. The book ends, but we know that di Prima became a working writer, a working artist, in the years between the book’s ending and the actual time in the late-1960s that di Prima wrote this text</p>	<p>9. Smith records a song, “Because the Night,” with Bruce Springsteen that “rose to number 13 on the Top 40 chart,” and she achieves fame as a working songwriter and poet (258).</p>	<p>9. Subject achieves a career as an artist</p>

Table 1 contd

10. In 1968, di Prima moves away from New York City to San Francisco (189).	10. “In the spring of 1979,” Smith leaves New York “to begin a new life with Fred Sonic Smith” in Detroit (263). Smith recalls, “Leave-taking was difficult, but it was time for me to embark on my own [...] I resumed the life of a citizen. It took me far from the world I had known” (263).	10. Subject moves away from city s/he originally came to upon becoming an artist; chronotope of the frontier no longer exists in the text
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As the chart above illustrates, just as the maps I included earlier demonstrated, Smith and di Prima’s books share subjects that exist in parallel circumstances. Smith and di Prima not only place their subjects within the same geographic location, they also tell similar stories of their autobiographical subjects undergoing nearly identical experiences in order to reach the same goal, and their stories are populated, as the chart shows, with the same types of characters. Having analyzed *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* to show that these two texts share examples of the types of narrative events and characters that manifest what I have named the chronotope of the artistic frontier, we can now construct our own narrative to explain what happens within this particular chronotope.

The narrative found within the chronotope of the artistic frontier begins with a subject moving to a new place. Within the iterations of the chronotope as it appears in *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, at least, in this new place, at some point, the subject finds him/herself living homelessly on the streets or in poverty. The subject acquires a job at an arts-based venue—for example, a bookstore—and begins living there.

Eventually, the subject lives in a communal space with other artists. The subject deals with illness and poverty as s/he tries to become a working artist, and s/he often feels that his/her work is pointless, that his/her work is simply not suited for the time in which s/he lives. Still, in this communal space, the subject is able to “woodshed,” or “practice [his/her] art” along with the other artists s/he lives with. At least once, the subject leaves the new place s/he moved to at the beginning of the narrative in order to live somewhere else, but the subject eventually returns. The subject continues to make friends with other artists whose artistic philosophies run parallel to his/her own, and these other artists become mentors to the subject. Eventually, the tangible “time space” of the artistic frontier disappears when the subject ultimately creates art that others recognize and begins a career as an artist. By moving out of the place s/he originally moved to at the beginning of the narrative now that s/he *has* become an artist, the subject enters another space that s/he created while exploring the frontier: a new world as it exists after the artist has changed it.

Certainly, the narrative I have just described that occurs within the chronotope of the artistic frontier does not appear in *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* alone. And for a chronotope to legitimately *be* a chronotope, as I have said, it must not be limited to geography or historical moment, it must be able to be seen in other locations at other historical moments. My chronotope of the artistic frontier additionally appears, I might suggest, in a work such as Woody Allen’s 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*. In this film, Allen tells a story about writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway as they live in Parisian garrets during the 1920s. The artistic frontier might also appear in stories about the Harlem Renaissance (see Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*), Weimar Berlin (see

Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*), or the Bloomsbury Group (though, admittedly, for this latter iteration of the chronotope, one would have to ignore poverty as one of the device's defining features). Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is another obvious example. I would even suggest that the chronotope manifests—albeit in an extremely augmented form—in David Fincher's 2010 film *The Social Network*, which traces Mark Zuckerberg's rise to fame as the founder of Facebook. But while I cannot fully explore the characteristics of the chronotope of the artistic career within more texts such as these, I believe it would be possible for other scholars to do so

As for why it even matters that the frontier manifests itself in the two books we are analyzing here, *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, remember that Bakhtin argued for the chronotope to provide a reading of texts that could “work past conceptions of genre” (Montgomery, qtd. in Sobchack 149). As Sobchack writes, “Chronotopes serve as the spatiotemporal currency between two different order of existence and discourse, between the historicity of the lived world and the literary world” (150). In our lived world, the life writing traditions of autobiography have historically not included women as participants in the discourse. However, the artistic frontier manifests in both Smith and di Prima's texts, bringing each of these women to careers as great artists in their own right as each inscribes herself as the central autobiographical subject of her book.

*Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* share a chronotope, or a specific expression of “time space” that occurs within literature. In my next chapter, I discuss di Prima's text to show how di Prima recalls the story of her existence within the space of the artistic frontier in order to transgresses the patriarchal structure of autobiography and become her own, “great [wo]man” within the discourse.

## CHAPTER II

### ON BECOMING THE “GREAT” AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECT

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* has now been in circulation for almost 45 years. However, this does not mean that either the book or its author is necessarily popular within academic circles. As Roseanne Giannini Quinn informs us in her essay, “The Willingness to Speak: Diane di Prima and Italian-American Feminist Body Politics,” di Prima is a literary figure whose presence within academic dialogue remains limited at best: “This writer of more than 30 books, contributor to more than 300 literary magazines and newspapers, and 70 anthologies, whose work has been translated into at least thirteen different languages does not have a book of literary and/or socio-political criticism devoted to her contribution of generic letters” (175-6). Even though “she has produced as impressive a body of work as any of her male Beat counterparts, including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Kerouac,” di Prima has been virtually excluded from academic discussion; she has been “marginalized, erased, and ignored in the canons of American literary scholarship” (175). Though in this thesis I intend to engage in scholarly dialogue about, specifically, Patti Smith’s *Just Kids*, I also make a conscious effort to add to the existing academic dialogue concerning di Prima by revealing why it matters that these two books share a chronotopic relationship: *Just Kids*, like *Memoirs of a Beatnik* before

it, represents a woman's successful attempt at overturning the masculinist traditions of life writing, especially autobiography.

Within the chronotope of the artistic frontier, an individual moves somewhere new, leaves that place and comes back to it, experiences and overcomes poverty, meets other artists and lives with them, practices his/her art, etc. Eventually, if that individual traverses the entire plane of the frontier, s/he becomes an artist in his/her own right, s/he comes into being as an artist along a narrative plotline specific to this particular chronotope. *The Bedford Glossary* notes that in autobiography, men typically cast their lives into narratives "whose established conventions call for a life-plot that turns on action, triumph through conflict, intellectual self-discovery, and often public renown," and "women's lives [. . .] are often characterized by interruption and deferral" (32). Regardless of a subject's gender, the plotline that a subject's narrative follows while in the frontier parallels this way that men have traditionally cast themselves into autobiographical molds

While not denying that the *Bedford's* definition certainly applies to *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, I would like to call attention to the fact that the iteration of the frontier as it manifests in Smith and di Prima's texts is unique inasmuch as it brings *women* to greatness as artists. As I have argued elsewhere, if we study the artistic frontier in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Just Kids*, we can "work past [our conception] of [autobiography]" as a structure intended to tell a man's life story in order to recognize that these female authors inscribe themselves as the central autobiographical subjects of their texts, even if the discourse they engage in during the time the chronotope manifests reads as a memoir. Both di Prima and Smith are women who perform their stories, within

which we find a manifestation of the artistic frontier, in order also to transgress the standard, masculine traditions of the autobiographical genre and become their own “great” selves within that discourse, or the central subjects of their books. Indeed, that the chronotope of the frontier manifests within their texts is evidence that their narratives—as well as their selves as they exist within those narratives—parallel the traditional form into which men have cast themselves as autobiographical figures. Again, though, if we were to rip out the pages of *Just Kids* and *Memoirs of a Beatnik* within which we find a manifestation of the chronotope of the artistic frontier, we would not rip out every page. In the pages we would rip out, we would find the authors becoming their own, “great” autobiographical subjects within the manifestation of the chronotope of the artistic frontier. But within the text that we would not rip from the books, we would find that both Smith and di Prima structure themselves as autobiographical subjects just as critics claim women have traditionally done by claiming subjectivity through others

We should remember that, as Leigh Gilmore argues, “the traditional development of the male autobiographical self begins in relationship (to a person, a family, a place) but develops into an understanding of his separateness from others,” thus allowing the male autobiographical subject to “[close] the hermeneutic circle on others and [rest] on the mimesis of the self as self-naming and self-named, where identity has its meaning in the identical relationship between self and name” (29). Because of autobiography’s development as a means for men to tell their own stories in which they become singular, distinct, individuals who name themselves and others, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, almost any “working definition” of life writing implies a particular “controlling trope—



the life of a ‘great man’” (195). This “controlling trope” is the reason that life writing has traditionally been a masculine genre. Still, women do write autobiographies. Their “I” just works differently. Shoshana Felman takes a psychoanalytic approach to reading gender and sexual identity, which, she suggests, explains the writing process women typically undertake when casting themselves into an autobiographical mold. Felman argues that, “trained to see ourselves [women] as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, [women] have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story but *must become* a story” (14). That is, because the linguistic “woman” exists in reference to the word “man,” and in order to define oneself as a woman, one must have another—possibly a man, but not always—by which to reference herself, women tend to define themselves in relation to others within their writing. In *The Liar’s Club*, for example, Mary Karr constructs herself vis-à-vis her mother. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard is alone in nature for most of the text all except for a tomcat that follows her around and through which she identifies a kindred connection. Felman’s position parallels Gilmore’s, who believes that “autobiography describes a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the various discourses [...] in which their subjectivity has been formed” (85). In result, both Felman and Gilmore claim that “the subject of [women’s] autobiography [is] not a single entity but a network of differences within which the subject is inscribed” (85). That is, women define themselves by grasping subjectivity through others.

In both *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *Just Kids*, we find examples of female authors who define themselves in these very ways, by claiming themselves through others and as

subjects who change. As for who these others are, some of them for di Prima include the men she has sex with—and, especially, her publisher. In *Just Kids*, Smith's most obvious other is clearly Robert Mapplethorpe. However, that women define themselves differently than men do in theory does not mean that we should believe that men's and women's autobiographical selves could never achieve the same outcomes. Indeed, both men and women are able to write themselves as autobiographical subjects. And just as a man's autobiographical representation eventually, as Gilmore argues, "develops into an understanding of his separateness from others," Smith and di Prima define themselves through others so they can, in turn, "[close] the hermeneutic circle on others" and show how they are separate from those others (29).

I return to my discussion of Patti Smith and *Just Kids* in my next chapter, wherein I will show that as the two texts share a chronotope, Smith's *Just Kids* follows *Memoirs of a Beatnik* in a tradition of texts in which women inscribe themselves as autobiographical subjects by becoming "great" in their own right. In this chapter, I show how di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* can be read as her autobiography. In defining *Memoirs of a Beatnik* as di Prima's autobiography, then, we can take as our most basic premise the fact that she traverses the artistic frontier to achieve "greatness" as an artist; therefore, di Prima supplants the "controlling trope" of autobiography as "the life of a 'great man'" with the life of a great woman (her own life).

Tina Zigon also discusses Diane di Prima in her thesis, which is entitled *Dancing to their Own Beat: Life Writing of Carolyn Cassady, Hettie Jones, Joyce Johnson, and Diane di Prima*. Clearly, like myself, Zigon writes about di Prima and her work in terms of life writing scholarship, and she covers much of the same territory that I am covering

here. We conduct fundamentally different readings of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, though. Zigon argues that di Prima's book does not provide a coherent enough account of di Prima or her personal history for us to call it an autobiography, but she concedes that it does agree with definitions of memoir. I, on the other hand, see di Prima's book as an autobiography. Zigon writes, "[di Prima's] personal 'experience,' indeed, takes up a large amount of the text, but the reader still finds out about the time in which di Prima and her friends and lovers were living" (82). She suggests that "even though we might not get a 'coherent' account of the history in di Prima's book [ ] we do get enough information about the time and place, the public events, so that we can say *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is, indeed, a memoir" (83). Eventually, when discussing the fact that "the cover of the book still has the photograph of its author on it," Zigon admits that she "believe[s] that di Prima's intention was to write her life and the life of others" and that "the text is in its essence autobiographical" (93), di Prima "did, after all, live her own life her way, and the [photograph] serve[s] as [a symbol] of this independent life" (95). However, when discussing a moment in *Memoirs*... when di Prima "recollects the evening when she first read Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl,'" Zigon suggests that "by incorporating into her memoir her personal experience of reading one of the defining literary works of the Beat generation, [di Prima] places this personal moment into the context of social as well as literary history. Thus, she gives me one more reason to argue in favor of her text being a memoir" (105). To Zigon, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is truly a memoir because "a memoir calls for the retelling of a personal experience, but also for the placement of this experience into a larger, public frame" (105). Indeed, on a certain level, di Prima's book is a memoir.

But I would add that *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is a memoir *only* while di Prima's textual representation of herself exists *within* what manifests as the spatiotemporal plane of the frontier. Again, the chronotope generates a subject who, if s/he re-tells his/her own story, *becomes* a "great" autobiographical self who exists beyond the frontier in the masculine tradition of the genre. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, the frontier at times disappears from the text altogether, and di Prima's subject does not exist within the spatiotemporal plane of the chronotope; instead, she exists as a singular artist with a career beyond the frontier. For example, in my last chapter I recalled that on the first page of the book, di Prima writes of herself as she is in 1969, while she is being taken to the airport after a reading at Berkeley di Prima remembers *back to* her time in New York in the '50s, and as she performs her story of that time, the frontier appears. However, on the first page of the book, the chronotope of the frontier is not present. Here, di Prima exists and writes from beyond the chronotope—and as I will show, there are other sections of the book in which di Prima writes from beyond the chronotope as well. To return to our visual metaphor, if we were to rip the pages out of di Prima's book in which the frontier appears, we would not rip out every page; there would be some text left. What we would have ripped out would be the pages that read as a memoir. And within the remaining text, we would find additional evidence that *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is actually di Prima's autobiography. That is, the frontier—and di Prima's memoir within which it appears—manifests itself *as a part within* a greater dialogue about di Prima's life, not only as it has been lived up to the point that she wrote her text, but even *after* her book was originally published and distributed for sale. If memoir shows a subject as a static self as it existed at one point within a grander life narrative and is actually a "work about others" that is

limited in its “outward scope,” as previous definitions posit, then autobiography displays a subject who changes and becomes a distinct individual over time. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, we witness di Prima, and her story, change. In turn, the book is not a merely memoir, a form of autobiography with limited scope, but is in fact di Prima’s autobiography, the story of her life as it has yet been lived.

For more evidence to prove my claim, let us again look to Gilmore, who performs a nuanced reading of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* in order to demonstrate her point about the “network of differences” that women express themselves to be in their autobiographies. Gilmore states that “Kincaid explores how [ . . . ] a subject may challenge the authority of the discourse of truth and identity [ . . . with ] a series of identities” (105). And she argues that “the text [*Annie John*] concludes, as *The House on Mango Street* does, with the narrator summing up her life as a narrative in which her name stands as a figure for changing identity” (105). Similarly, Diane di Prima achieves Kincaid’s effect in her writing. At the end of di Prima’s book, her own signature “stands as a figure for changing identity.”

di Prima composed *Memoirs of a Beatnik* at a historical moment when it might have been a remarkable achievement for a woman to write any account of her sexual past into a published book. And even speaking from a twenty-first century standpoint, di Prima takes sexuality to an extreme—arguably pornographic—level as she tells of “fucking [her] comrades” (171). In this book, every instance of textual sex occurs as di Prima’s character inhabits what manifests as the chronotope of the artistic frontier. And there are *at least* twenty sex scenes within which she engages “comrades,” including such real-life characters as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. These “comrades” are clearly

others through whom di Prima defines herself. In positioning herself in the ranks of Ginsberg and Kerouac, di Prima claims herself as a member of their group. However, when we consider the sheer number of others with whom di Prima engages in sexual play, no particular other stands out. What is more helpful to our discussion of women's autobiography, then, is that di Prima uses reflexive, meta-writing techniques. And she presents readers with additional representations of herself (that is, as a "changing identity") as she exists beyond the manifestation of the artistic frontier.

One example of di Prima's multiply produced self comes from her "Afterword—Writing Memoirs," which was written in 1987, almost 20 years after the book's original publication. di Prima admits here, in hindsight, that she succumbed to pressure from her publisher, Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press, to write "MORE SEX!" into her *Memoirs*. (193) di Prima recalls that in order to satisfy Girodias's requests for "MORE SEX!", "I would dream up odd angles of bodies or weird combinations of humans and cram them in [the book] and send it off again. Sometimes I'd wander the house looking for folks to check things out with [...] and we would find out, in a friendly disinterested way, if a particular contortion was viable, and stand up again, completely not turned on, and go about our business" (193). di Prima also, during a passage entitled "Fuck the Pill. A Digression," writes, "I never used anything to avoid getting pregnant, and never once got pregnant. Some kind of youthful charisma kept the thing going" (103). In 1988, though, long after she explored the frontier of her work *and* nineteen years after she originally published the book, di Prima added a footnote to "Fuck the Pill" in which she advises readers that this "is *not* an encouragement to avoid condoms now [...] having a

kid can be a great celebration of life; flirting with AIDS is [...] simply courting a quick and ugly death" (103)

By adding the 1988 footnote concerning AIDS and the reflexive "Afterword—Writing Memoirs," written in 1987, di Prima lets her readers know that the sex in her book could be—and also *might not* be—false, that her story still is not completely finished, and that she, and no one else, has control over her story's final outcome as it exists beyond the frontier. But we do not need the 1988 edition of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* to witness di Prima exposing herself as she weaves elements of fiction into her book. Indeed, even if we had read a first-edition copy of the book immediately after it was released in 1969, we would have noticed a scene in which she writes about an orgy, entitled "A Night by the Fire: What You Would Like to Hear." She immediately follows the orgy with another scene entitled "A Night by the Fire. What Actually Happened," in which characters huddle around a fire in their communal pad space trying to stay warm while "exhausted"; in this second telling of "A Night..," no characters engage in sexual intercourse (148-51). These instances both occur within the time-space of the frontier. Clearly, she fabricates scenes to tailor her writing to Girodias's demands and admits subtly in the original text that she fabricated them; then, in hindsight, years after publishing the book, she *literally* exposes in her afterword how she manipulated those demands. Without di Prima letting us know about Girodias's invisible hand in the book through *any* meta-writing technique, we might (wrongly) assume that the sex in the text is not fabricated and therefore perform a misreading of di Prima herself. So, indeed, her existence as the teller of the truth in the text's most recent incarnation is dependent on her treatment of Girodias, and here we can of course see an example of di Prima defining

herself through another person. However, by defining him as someone who pressured her to write all that sex to begin with—therefore defining herself as the subject who produces truth, and the truth is that the sex could be entirely fabricated, and we cannot know the extent to which this fabrication exists—we witness di Prima subvert a patriarchal force by wielding authorial power over him and presenting him as a static character within her book. Whereas Girodias’s influence in the book could have eluded audiences (and, presumably, did, and probably still does), di Prima separates herself from his influence and, instead of allowing his presence to control the outcome of her story, she authors him instead. By admitting the existence of his invisible hand in the book, she “[closes] the hermeneutic circle” on him.

In turn, di Prima exists within *Memoirs of a Beatnik* not only as the self in the made-up sex scenes that exists in what manifests as the frontier, but as the self who, in 1969 and in 1987, admitted that she made up those sex scenes, albeit this confession comes in two different packages. In other words, di Prima’s identity—in line with Gilmore’s argument—changes subtly throughout the original 1969 version of the book, and changes drastically as the book is reproduced in 1987. Her signature at the end of her afterword, on the last page of her book as it currently exists, “stands as a figure for a changing identity,” or a self that is inscribed within a “network of differences.” This self speaks for overwriting what it had originally written. di Prima’s textual representation of herself in the book—like anyone’s self in the real world—changes and separates from the influence of the others through which she originally defined herself. Though di Prima claims subjectivity through others, di Prima’s autobiographical self parallels the traditional autobiographical man’s inasmuch as she stands alone, separate, away from



others. Consequently, by inscribing herself as an autobiographical subject, di Prima “challenge[s] the authority of the discourse of truth and identity” as a discourse produced by males. Indeed, in di Prima’s autobiography, *she* produces “the discourse of truth.” di Prima becomes not the named, but the one who names. And as the one who names, di Prima suggests that truth is subjective and multiple.

I do not mean to imply that women *should* write themselves as men do. What I do mean, instead, is that autobiography, as a genre, should recognize that the way women inscribe themselves into being as autobiographical subjects is not always so drastically different from the way men write themselves, and vice-versa. Indeed, any subject—male or female—can still be “great” and exhibit “separateness from others” *even if* s/he has to define herself through others. Nowhere, in any of these feminist readings of autobiography, can I find reason to suggest that women cannot or should not become “great” individuals. I also cannot find any reason to suggest women could never become “separate” individuals capable of “[closing] the hermeneutic circle on others” in writing. I have given an example of how di Prima is able to achieve separation through displaying her changing selves. Becoming a “network of differences” *implies* separation from others inasmuch as difference itself implies separation from something, or something to be different from. It is true that di Prima adheres to Gilmore’s observation that women “reconstruct the various discourses [...] in which [their] subjectivity has been formed” (85). But more importantly, I have aimed to show in this chapter that di Prima displays these various discourses so that she can ultimately detach from them, show her difference from them, and express how she is separate from them. di Prima composes herself as a

separate entity by insisting that her autobiographical representation is a subjective, multiply produced network of selves

In turn, with di Prima in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* we have an example of a woman who achieves “greatness” by traversing a manifestation of the chronotope of the artistic frontier and departing it an established artist and the central autobiographical subject of the text. Additionally, another way she becomes an autobiographical subject is by doing as women do and representing herself in relation to others and by presenting herself within a “network of differences” in which her name represents not a static self, but a self that changes. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, di Prima becomes the central and “separate” subject of her text by “[closing] the hermeneutic circle on [the] others” through which she defines herself. She positions herself as the central autobiographical subject. She becomes the subject who professes truth as it exists from *her* perspective. *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is, indeed, Diane di Prima’s autobiography.

## CHAPTER III

### PATTI SMITH AND *JUST KIDS* CONTINUING THE TRADITION

In this chapter, I examine *Just Kids* to prove that Patti Smith writes her book in the tradition of di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. Within Smith's book, as in di Prima's, the chronotope of the artistic frontier appears. Through the narrative trajectory that this chronotope generates, Smith's autobiographical subject achieves "greatness" as an artist, thereby causing Smith to perform her story much like the male autobiographical subject who has traditionally occupied the genre. In this sense, then, Smith—like di Prima before her—supplants "the controlling trope" of autobiography, "the life of a 'great man,'" with her own life, and in doing so, she re-structures the gender associations traditionally inherent within the life writing genre of autobiography. Smith also constructs her autobiographical self similarly to di Prima in another way: she constructs herself as a network of selves. For example, when Smith includes photographs of herself throughout her career, she at once constructs an autobiographical "image" of herself and additionally exists as the historical self that she is in the photographs. The earliest photograph Smith includes of herself is as a little girl in "Bible school, Philadelphia" (14). And the most recent photograph, the "last Polaroid" that Mapplethorpe took of Smith, in which she holds her baby daughter Jesse, dates to "1988" (272). Below are some more photographs, arranged in the order they appear in the book.



Fig. 3 – Picture from Coney Island (n.p.)



*First portrait, Brooklyn*

Fig. 4 – First portrait, Brooklyn (46)



Fig. 5 – Patti Smith with feather (82)





Fig. 6 – West Twenty-third Street, fire escape (201)

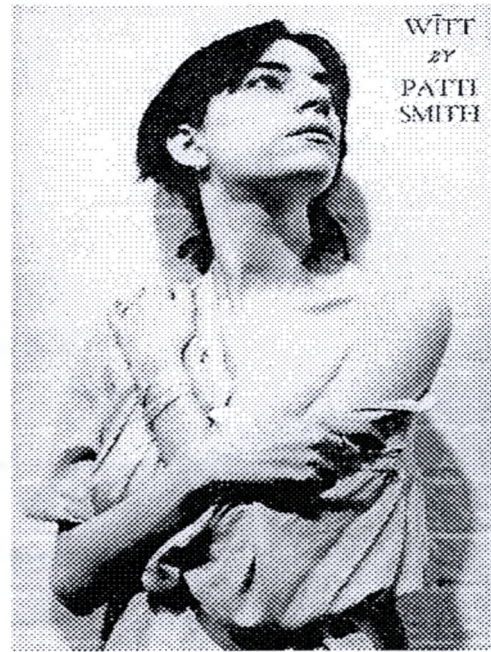


Fig. 7 – Witt, Bond Street, 1973 (224)

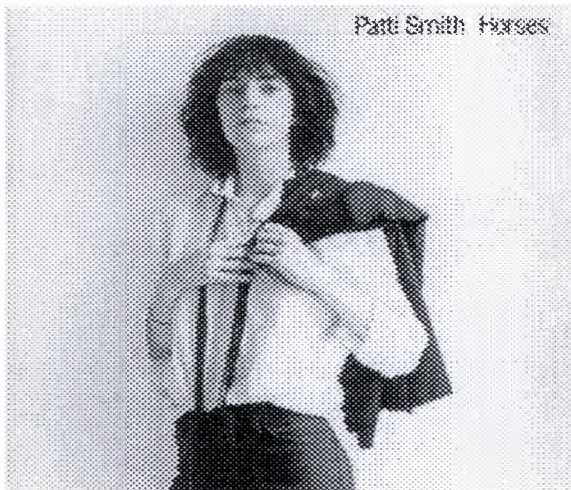


Fig. 8 – Album cover for *Horses*, taken by Robert Mapplethorpe (251)



Fig. 9 – *Still Moving*, 1978 (255)





Fig. 10 – 1 Fifth Avenue, 1978 (259)

It is important to notice that when



Fig. 11 – Patti Smith with butterfly (268)

Smith is young and becoming an artist with Mapplethorpe, or existing within the spatiotemporal plane that manifests as the chronotope of the artistic frontier, he is in the photographs with her. But once she begins creating work—that is, when the chronotope of the frontier disappears from her book and is no longer a “generative principle of [her] narrative”—she appears in the photographs as the singular, central subject of the photos. Mapplethorpe took all of the last five photos. Still, as Smith ages, she stands alone in them, and she uses them in order to showcase her changing self throughout time. That is, by displaying these photographs in her book, Smith portrays images of herself as she was at particular historical moments throughout her life, and she constructs an autobiographical representation of herself through these photographs: this is who I was then, and now, I am writing this book.

As previously noted, Roy Pascal argues that the about autobiography implies “the imposition of a pattern upon a life” (qtd. in Jelinek 2). We can indeed trace the growth of

Smith's autobiographical subject as it appears first in opposition to and later within a symbol, a pattern, which recurs throughout her book. In her first chapter, Smith recalls learning a prayer from her mother (4). After learning this prayer, Smith recalls, "I would lie in my bed by the coal stove vigorously mouthing long letters to God" (5). These prayers became Smith's "entrance into the radiance of imagination. This process was especially magnified within the fevers of influenza, measles, chicken pox, and mumps. I had them all and with each I was privileged with a new level of awareness" (5). Smith tells us that because of these illnesses, "lying deep within myself, the symmetry of a snowflake spinning above me, intensifying through my lids, I seized a most worthy souvenir, a shard of heaven's kaleidoscope" (5). This "kaleidoscope" image appears multiple times throughout *Just Kids*, always within a scene in which Smith undergoes a moment of either enlightenment or transformation—or, perhaps, both.

For example, the first time she spends the night with Mapplethorpe, she recalls, "he unrolled some paintings" and showed her some of his psychedelic art, "Multifarious energies radiat[ing] through interweaving words and calligraphic line. Energy fields built within layers of word. Paintings and drawings that seemed to emerge from the subconscious" (40). Smith sees one image in particular, "a set of interweaving discs intertwining with the words EGO LOVE GOD merging them with his own name," and she becomes "compelled to tell him of [her] nights as a child seeing circular patterns radiating on the ceiling" (40). He "opened a book on Tantric art," and in it she recognizes "the celestial circles of [her] childhood. A mandala" (40). Mapplethorpe gives her a piece of his art "without hesitation," and she writes that she "understood that in this small space of time we had mutually surrendered our loneliness and replaced it with trust" (40). It is

important to note for the larger discussion about the chronotope that this is a pivotal moment within the constitution of the artistic frontier, for this is one of the specific narrative events that the frontier generates, in which Smith join forces with Mapplethorpe, another to-be artist, through an emotional bond that reinforces their mutual belief in art as a cause worthy of dedicating one's life to.

Later, on the first night that Smith and Mapplethorpe live in the Chelsea Hotel, Smith finds herself "too excited to sleep," and she writes that "infinite possibilities seemed to swirl above me" (106). She writes that she "stared up at the plaster ceiling as [she] had done as a child," writing, "it seemed to me that the vibrating patterns overhead were sliding into the place" (106). And again, Smith recalls seeing "the mandala of my life" (106). The swirling pattern overhead is the "circles of my childhood" when she is a young adult, and later it becomes the pinwheel that spins above her "life" as she ages. Thus, along with this "kaleidoscope" symbol, Smith includes commentary about her aging self. Finally, Smith literally turns the image of herself into the mandala when she smokes marijuana for the first time and feels an "uncontrollable" urge to keep "moving in circles" (220). Here, Smith becomes a part of the symbol of the "mandala," the "kaleidoscope"; she reaches unity with the spinning circles above her—or, perhaps, she reaches a level of enlightenment. If we trace this image of the "kaleidoscope" through Smith's text, we catch glimpses of Smith as she sees this image at moments throughout her life. In effect, we witness Smith's self as it changes not within a specific and singular time period, but instead *throughout* multiple historical moments *throughout* her life. Consequently, we witness another piece of evidence that suggests *Just Kids* is not Smith's memoir but, instead, her autobiography.



Additionally, Smith also places herself within a network of aesthetic kinships of affinity, and thus, Smith's *Just Kids* exhibits yet another intertextual dialogue with di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. For it is from di Prima's "scandalous little book" that Blossom S. Kirschenbaum recalls the scene in which "Diane di Prima tells how one afternoon someone handed her a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*; she kept thinking the phrase 'breaking ground,' and felt she was about to meet her brothers" (53). Kirschenbaum traces di Prima's ties with "the Beat confraternity," and she notes, "in both work and personal life [di Prima] was seeking out a family of affinity (53) Kirschenbaum gives an overview of how the word "family" has been defined and re-defined in the U S. throughout the twentieth century, both in courts of law and out of them, and she suggests that "as a poet concerned with the meaning of words [...] di Prima participated deliberately in changing the meaning of the term 'family'" (53) di Prima, Kirschenbaum argues, "has a strong sense of artists as confraternity and sorority Relatives, friends, and lovers conjoin as family here [ ..] In directly challenging the concept of legitimacy, in revising the index of *who really counts* [ ..] di Prima has been rewriting history and, by implication, genealogy. She widens the concept of common ancestry and common progeny" (66)

Similarly, toward the end of *Just Kids*, Patti Smith defines her familial bond with Mapplethorpe. In 1989, while Mapplethorpe is on his deathbed, he looks at Smith and says, "We never had any children" (274). "Our work was our children," she responds (274). If "di Prima participated deliberately in changing the meaning of the term 'family,'" it is clear Smith participates in the same word-changing act almost as deliberately throughout her book. Smith establishes a familial bond between herself and

Mapplethorpe in which they are kin to each other through their art, and their art is, literally, their progeny. In using the rhetoric of marriage, being “ultimately b[ound]” to one another, Smith constructs a familial relationship with Mapplethorpe that might lay claim to a statement such as “‘til death do us part.” If Smith’s familial network in the book is built out of her familial kinships of affinity with other artists, her next of kin is most obviously Robert Mapplethorpe. And in celebrating Mapplethorpe’s life, Smith also admits his faults—as well as her complicity in those faults. At one point in the book, Smith recalls she gave people a cautionary warning as they tried to court Mapplethorpe during the 1970s: “Robert was highly sought after by both men and women. Often acquaintances would knock on my door asking me if he was fair game and seeking tips for the way into his heart. ‘Love his work,’ I would say. But few listened” (203). I believe we can apply this caution to our own reading of Smith and Mapplethorpe as they exist in her book. In reminding others to “Love his work,” Smith also reminds us that *their* work comes as a two-package deal. As well, Smith reminds us that in order to “read” *either* of their work, audiences should understand the relationship dynamic, an aesthetically grounded marriage, involved in their art. Even if their personal relationship had its own struggles, their artistic, marriage-like bond, their familial bond, is pure, holy. *Just Kids* does dabble in the discourse of memoir as Smith writes herself as opposed to Robert Mapplethorpe during the “Just Kids” and “Hotel Chelsea” chapters. And even as he dies, their stories intertwine, which resembles memoir. However, we must remember that memoir only details a part within a life; the discourse does not tell about a subject’s entire life, which is the objective of biography and autobiography. Smith and Mapplethorpe’s individual autobiographical and biographical narratives begin to connect

and intertwine within the chronotope when he gives her a piece of his art in the passage about the “kaleidoscope,” and their stories continue to intertwine throughout their lives. In this sense, part of *Just Kids* is a “work about others.”

But, as I have stated previously, the chronotope of the frontier exists *within* a greater dialogue about the subjects, as the frontier eventually disappears once it transports the subjects to fame and “greatness.” Since we know that the chronotope generates a “great” artist, we know that, in her book, Smith becomes a “great” individual. Still, *Just Kids* is only a “work about others” so she can ultimately cast the book as a work in which she defines herself as separate, away from others. Just as she is in many of the pictures that she includes once the spatiotemporal manifestation of the chronotope disappears from her book, Smith is the singular—and, indeed, central—subject of her text.

For example, when she is homeless and living in New York City, Smith recalls, “in this shifting, inhospitable atmosphere, a chance encounter changed the course of my life” (31). This “chance encounter” is actually the third time that Smith and Mapplethorpe meet, and it is after this encounter that she returns home with him and he gives her his art. (Their first and second encounters are of no consequence to this argument.) Expressing that she was “demoralized by hunger” (37), Smith tells readers that she accepted an offer to go out to eat with a man she did not know. After dinner, Smith recalls, “we walked all the way downtown [...] I was conjuring up lines of escape when he suggested we go up to his apartment for a drink [...] I was looking around desperately, unable to answer him, when I saw a young man approaching. It was as if a small portal of the future opened, and out stepped the boy from Brooklyn” (38). It is interesting that Smith uses the words “portal of the future” here, for she implies that Mapplethorpe seemed to materialize from

out of a different spatiotemporal framework. And in terms of our discussion of Smith's expression of the chronotope in her book, he *does* exist in a different spatiotemporal framework. Though Mapplethorpe and Smith have, at this point in the book, come together three times, each still exists within his/her own place; their paths have not been bound together by their shared vision. As she stands on the street looking for an escape and Mapplethorpe approaches, she whispers to him, "I need help," and she tells the man who took her to dinner, "'This is my boyfriend [...] He's been looking for me. He's really mad. He wants me to come home now [. . .] 'Run,' I cried, and the boy grabbed my hand and we took off" (39). When they stop running, she says, "I never told you my name, it's Patti" 'My name is Bob.' 'Bob,' I said, really looking at him for the first time 'Somehow you don't seem like a Bob to me. Is it okay if I call you Robert?'" (39). Here, when Mapplethorpe finally receives a name in the text, Smith immediately suggests a change to it. Whereas a wife might surrender the surname of her father, the name of her youth, in place of her husband's, which she will have for the remainder of adulthood, Mapplethorpe here surrenders his boyhood first name for a more adult name that a woman gives him. Already, Smith establishes that *she* is the central subject, the one who names others, in this text.

In the following weeks, the two become lovers (41-3). After they eventually move in together, Smith recalls, "Robert got laid off from Brentano's [and] spent his unemployed days in the continual transformation of our living space" (50). Smith admits that this time in her life brought about "low periods," but "Robert had little patience with these introspective bouts of mine" (65). When he becomes "unable to tell [his family] we were living together out of wedlock," he creates an "elaborate deception" that Smith

thinks is “unnecessary”: he takes her to his family’s home and uses her to release tension between himself and his family. They pretend like they actually *are* married (66). In these two examples—Smith’s “low periods” and Mapplethorpe’s struggle with his family—we see the time-space of the frontier materialize as the to-be artists moving within the chronotopic plane struggle with feelings of outsidership.

Later, as his feelings of outsidership lead him to question his sexuality, Mapplethorpe “dismantl[es...] the romantic chapel in which we slept” and becomes “brooding” and “troubled” (71). “There came a time,” she recalls, “when Robert’s aesthetic became so consuming that I felt it was no longer our world, but his. I believed in him, but he had transformed our home into a theatre of his own design” (71). That is, during the time that Mapplethorpe struggles with his sexuality, he literally changes the space around himself and Smith. Time and space, as Smith expresses it here, are indeed localized and “visible” within this “pad,” even if Smith asserts that it is *not* “our world,” or a spatiotemporal plane that Smith and Mapplethorpe both inhabit, “but his.” Mapplethorpe becomes “uncharacteristically annoyed” at Smith’s presence, “and increasingly possessive” (72). Smith begins “to spend more time with old friends [ . . . ] especially the painter Howard Michaels” as she “hunger[s] for communication,” and she admits that she is “less than candid with Robert about the nature of [her] growing intimacy [with Michaels]” (72). If Smith and Mapplethorpe are living out a version of marriage, Smith is no faithful spouse. Instead, she exists within this marriage—as he does—as her own individual subject. And though their individual narratives share an expression of time-space for a while, eventually they move away from each others’ planes of existence. Mapplethorpe literally re-locates, moves to San Francisco, and, for a

while, is absent from the text. Presumably, Mapplethorpe still exists in this portion of the book within a manifestation of the artistic frontier that is all his own. But what is important for our discussion about Smith's construction of an autobiography is that he is no longer in *her* precise spatiotemporal plane; the players she may interact with might be similar in that they are all artists, but she exists within a chronotopic field that is *hers*.

Smith and Mapplethorpe move back in together—this time at the Hotel Chelsea, another “pad” space that is characteristic to our chronotope of the artistic frontier. He begins hustling to make money, and she “beg[s] him not to go, but he [is] determined [ . ] My tears did not stop him” (135). When Bob Neuwirth shows interest in her poetry and she tells Mapplethorpe, “I had drinks with a strange guy” in order to show Neuwirth her poetry, Mapplethorpe acts “a little angry” at her for showing her work to another man (142). She writes, “His dual nature troubled me” (187). She tells us that “Robert would never compromise, but oddly enough, he kept a censorious eye on me. He worried that my confrontational manner would hamper my chance of success” (199). However, she does not allow Mapplethorpe's “censorious” eye to compromise her work, writing that “the success he wished for me was the least of my concern. When Telegraph Books, a revolutionary small press spearheaded by Andrew Wylie, offered to publish a small book of poems, I concentrated on work that skirted the edge of sex, broads, and blasphemy” (199). Here, again, Smith asserts her independence from Mapplethorpe.

To reinforce her separation from Mapplethorpe, we should also recognize that Mapplethorpe is not the only artist with whom she constructs a type of familial relationship. As she defines herself in relation to more artists using the same kinship system of aesthetic affinity, Smith proclaims herself as her own artist among the others.

These others include Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Sam Shepard, Fred “Sonic” Smith, among many. Indeed, on her first night in the Hotel Chelsea, for example, after she meets the other residents, she recalls, “I felt an inexplicable sense of kinship with these people” (106). And at the end of the “Hotel Chelsea” chapter, Smith writes an elegy for these and other artists: “Many would not make it,” she writes (209). “Candy Darling died of cancer. Tinkerbelle and Andrea Whips took their lives. Others sacrificed themselves to drugs and misadventure. [...] I feel no sense of vindication as one of the handfuls of survivors. I would rather have seen them all succeed, catch the brass ring” (209). It can be assumed, though he has not yet died in the text, that Mapplethorpe is one of these artists whom she mourns here. However, what is important for us to understand is that Smith establishes herself as existing within a familial system with these other artists, but she eventually stands alone, away from them. She is, literally, one of the only ones of these artists who is still living.

To summarize the argument in this chapter, then, let us refer to “Rimbaud and Patti Smith. Social Deviance and Style,” in which Carrie Jaures Noland considers Smith’s music and its intertextual relationship with Rimbaud’s poetry: “In keeping with [Rimbaud’s] avant-garde practice based on the transgression of traditional boundaries between art and other domains, Smith implies that an aesthetic redefinition will involve a new conception [...] human beings themselves are to be reborn” (596). If Smith and Mapplethorpe’s art is really their “children,” then we might argue that Mapplethorpe is reborn in *Just Kids*, and that Smith uses the book to solidify the kinships she has been developing throughout her career. By developing a kinship system in *Just Kids*, Smith becomes one of the members within a constructed, familial network of other artists. What

is important in my previous sentence is that she is *one* of those members. She is singular and separate. She is her own autobiographical subject.

As Diane di Prima did in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* before her, Patti Smith uses *Just Kids* in order to become her own “great” individual by following the narrative trajectory of the chronotope of the artistic frontier. Additionally, she uses photographs of herself to construct one network of selves; she joins with a symbol of a “kaleidoscope” to become a part of another network. She also exists within a familial network with other artists through her construction of a kinship of aesthetic affinity. Clearly, she constructs herself as a multiply produced person, she defines herself, as Gilmore and Felman say women do, through others. But as I have shown, just because she defines herself through others does not mean that she is unable to stand alone as her own, “separate,” “great” individual—as indeed she does. In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith continues in the tradition of Diane di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, transgressing the masculinist leanings of the genre of autobiography to become her own “great” autobiographical subject.



## CHAPTER IV

### REWRITING BIOGRAPHY, OR, REWRITING LIFE WRITING

I have argued that in *Just Kids*, Patti Smith re-structures the mythos of biography—and, by extension, other forms of life writing. I made this argument by pointing out that instead of writing a traditional biography of Robert Mapplethorpe, one that relies on academic scholarship and footnotes and citations, Smith instead writes one from a subjective standpoint. I realize that because I have said many times throughout this thesis that Mapplethorpe joins her in what manifests as chronotope of the artistic frontier—and because this portion of her book reads like a memoir—my argument might seem faulty. Indeed, if Smith only writes of Mapplethorpe as he exists alongside her within the chronotope, and this portion of the book resembles a memoir, I have no grounds on which to say that Smith writes his biography; therefore, I cannot claim that she revises the generic rules of life writing. But again, if we recognize the time-space in the book within which the chronotope of the frontier manifests, we will also recognize that it eventually disappears from the text. Though the chronotope of the frontier is the predominate time-space that manifests throughout the book, it is *not* the only time-space found in the book. Indeed, once the time-space disappears, another—the artistic career beyond the frontier—materializes.

Smith does *not simply* write a recollection of Mapplethorpe as he was during one part of their lives, that is, she does not *simply* write a memoir. Parts of her book may *read like* a memoir, but her book in its totality is not a memoir. It is also an autobiography of Smith and a biography of Robert Mapplethorpe. In *Just Kids*, Smith writes about Mapplethorpe's entire life, from birth to death. And she composes his biography from her own subjective, and not objective, viewpoint.

Therefore, it *is* true that Patti Smith tears down, throws away, and re-builds life writing so that *is* built upon the life of a woman (her own life), professes truth from *her* viewpoint, and does not rely on the patriarchal, masculinist methods that have been standard to the genre for centuries. In turn, by re-structuring biography and positioning it as secondary to a woman's autobiography (for without her autobiography, the biography of the man, Mapplethorpe, would not exist in *this* form), Smith does indeed regenerate the gendered traditions of the life writing genres. And consequently, we can see *Just Kids* as a type of life writing for which we do not even have a name.

To begin our analysis Smith recalls in "A Note to the Reader" (one of the sections that she added to the book *after* its first press run) that "On March 8, 1989, Robert and I had our last conversation. The last, that is, in the human form. He knew he was dying and yet there was still a note of hope, a singular and obdurate thread, woven in the timbre of his voice" (287). She writes, "I told him that I would continue our work, our collaboration, for as long as I lived" (287). He then asks her, "Will you write our story?" (287). After hesitation—"Do you want me to" she questions him, and he tells her, "You have to [...] no one but you can write it" (287). Smith promises him she will: "I will do it, I promised, though I knew it would be a difficult vow to keep. I love you Patti. I love

you Robert. And he was wheeled away for tests and I never heard him speak again” (287).

In the years between his death and the time she wrote the book, Smith tells us, “I wrote the poem for his memorial card [...] I wrote the piece for *Flowers* [...] I wrote *The Coral Sea* and made drawings in remembrance of him but our story was obliged to wait until I could find the right voice. There are many stories I could yet write about Robert, about us. But this is the story I have told” (287-8) Just before she signs “A Note to the Reader” with the date “May 22, 2010,” Smith writes, “No one could speak for these two young people nor tell with any truth of their days and nights together. Only Robert and I could tell it. Our story, as he called it. And, having gone, he left the task to me to tell it to you” (288).

I have emphasized that Patti Smith has never had much scholarly material published about her. When she writes herself into existence in *Just Kids* as an autobiographical subject, she truly does inform her audience about herself at much greater length than any other writer had done prior. If we wish to learn about Smith, we should pay attention to this text if we wish to learn about Smith. The same case cannot be made concerning Robert Mapplethorpe. He has been widely written about, making a complete bibliography of critical articles, books, and other media that concerns him an exhausting task. However, we can notice one trend that occurs within these writings about Mapplethorpe and his work: he is widely believed to have been, simply, a bad person. Smith undercuts this trend in her book.

In order for us to discuss this trend, it may be useful for us to first locate the differing types of audiences that Mapplethorpe—and his work—could have. First, there

is Patti Smith, who lived side-by-side with Mapplethorpe and watched him grow (and die); she is an audience who views him and his work from an intimately personal perspective because she played an active part in both his life and the creation of his work. There is also his contemporary audience such as the one Richard Meyer describes in “Robert Mapplethorpe and the Discipline of Photography,” in which Meyer recalls Mapplethorpe’s *Censored* show in 1978 at “80 Langton Street” in San Francisco, “located just off Folsom Street, the center (then as now) of San Francisco’s gay leather scene” (360). Within this audience were “Patrons of the San Francisco art circuit [who could] now ‘rub shoulders’ with the ‘men in black leather’ while safely installed within the chic propriety of the art opening” (362). For this audience, Meyer notes, Mapplethorpe’s photography “seem[ed] to fulfill the conventional function of documentary photography, namely, the framing of the subject as victim, freak, or specimen in relation to an enfranchised, implicitly normative viewing audience” (362).

This audience—and of course there were other groups of people like this one—saw Mapplethorpe’s work in galleries, and this audience, as Meyer presents it, viewed Mapplethorpe as “an avatar of erotic transgressions he photographs, the gay male artist engaging in a wild side of subculture in order to frame (and tame) its image for the gallery crowd” (362). There is another type of audience, who discovered Mapplethorpe and his work through print media. In his essay “Looking for Trouble,” Kobena Mercer recalls seeing Mapplethorpe’s *Black Book*, which includes a series of images of the black male nude form. Mercer remembers thinking Mapplethorpe was propagating racist notions about black males. Mercer recalls that he originally focused on “the obsessive undercurrent in [Mapplethorpe’s] black nudes” that “appear[s] to confirm [...] fixity” and

“The scopic fixation on the signifying difference of black skin” which “thus implies a kind of ‘negrophilia’” that inverts the “psychic representations of ‘negrophobia’” and reinforces the original structure of oppression of the black subject (353). Mercer concludes this part of his essay with “both positions,” negrophilia and negrophobia, “whether they overvalue or devalue the visible signs of blackness, inhabit the shared space of colonial fantasy” (353). While audiences who viewed Mapplethorpe’s work in a gallery saw the artist documenting subculture so that he could display the “victim[s]” of that subculture “for the gallery crowd,” Mercer, who viewed the photographer’s work originally in print, also sees acts of exploitation in Mapplethorpe’s work

Mercer and Meyer themselves, though, are inclusive of yet another type of audience. They are both scholars who have written their essays about the critical effects of Mapplethorpe’s photography. Meyer finally argues that the 1978 gallery audience perceived Mapplethorpe’s work incorrectly, forgetting that a critical reading of his photographs demonstrates “[explicit refutation of] the economy of concerned or ‘victim’ photography” (376). Mercer, too, ultimately demonstrates that Mapplethorpe’s photography is critically opposed to victimization and oppression of the subject, writing that, in time, he realized “Mapplethorpe’s authorial identity as an explicitly gay artist (located, like other gay artists, on the margins of mainstream art-world institutions)” made it “necessary” for him “to reverse [his original] view and recognize the way in which [Mapplethorpe’s] aesthetic strategy begins to subvert the hierarchy of the cultural codes” (356). Mercer and Meyer’s type of audience is one that takes a thoughtful, critical stance to gazing at Mapplethorpe’s work, one that does not just lash back and decry Mapplethorpe for, say, their own negative reaction to his image of self-penetration with a

bullwhip or his photograph of a black man's body in a white suit with his penis hanging out of the fly of the pants. Their arguments imply that Mapplethorpe is not merely an exploiter of his subjects, but a serious photographer who should be respected because he documents those subjects so as to *not* label them as "freaks" or "victims," but instead to showcase those subjects' strength and independence.

However, even though audiences such as Mercer and Meyer exist, their thoughtful opinions of Mapplethorpe and his work are, frankly, overshadowed by others whose negative opinions of the photographer and his work cast him in a very unfavorable light, and this is the trend in his biographical representation that Smith undercuts in *Just Kids*. By perhaps an overwhelming margin, Robert Mapplethorpe is frequently portrayed in biographical portraits as a manipulative and exploitive photographer whose usage of marginalized subjects in order to create work that he could profit from only, in turn, further marginalized those subjects. He's quite simply made out to be a bad person. For example, Patricia Morrisroe writes in her 1995 *Mapplethorpe. A Biography*, that Mapplethorpe's "biggest regret was that he wouldn't reap the benefits of celebrity," that he "was obsessed with male beauty" and "worshipped black men, but he denigrated them with racial epithets" (xvi) Morrisroe claims, "his life was dusky and gray and morally ambiguous" (xvi), and later in the book she celebrates him—or, perhaps, judges him—as a figure who was entirely skilled at "undermining" those around him (229). Additionally, in James Crump's 2007 documentary *Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe*, a contemporary of Mapplethorpe's says, "I was convinced [...] that [Mapplethorpe] could manipulate people extremely well—and I use the word 'manipulate.'" Another individual recalls that Mapplethorpe "was such an exploiter of

things, I mean he was exploiting these subjects, and the subjects weren't exploiting him. I think that he was very much in control of the subjects. He [...] somehow manipulat[ed] people into doing what he wanted them to do."

While I do not believe that exploitation and manipulation are inherently bad or *wrong*, I do think "denigrat[ing subjects] with racial epithets" is wrong. Beyond this concession, I cannot ignore what appears to be an accusatory tone that each of these people displays when writing or speaking about Mapplethorpe's "manipulative" methods in creating his art. Smith, though, writes over this criticism of Mapplethorpe when she explains her experience with him as his model. Simply, having written in "A Note to the Reader" that only she could tell the story of her and Mapplethorpe's rises to fame, she suggests that she is *the* authority to make any sort of judgment about Mapplethorpe. And by her judgment, he is clearly not a bad person.

Even before she tells of meeting him, Smith gives us the story of his upbringing before she knew him, and she begins with his birth. "Robert Michael Mapplethorpe was born on Monday, November 4, 1946," she writes, and she then gives us the story of his youth before he moved to New York City: "He contained, even at an early age, a stirring and the desire to stir [...] He was an artist and he knew it. It was not a childish notion. He merely acknowledged what was his" (13). She also tells of his struggles with his family as a teenager and young adult (16) and of his early experiences with LSD, which would become extremely influential to his art (20). Later, in the chapter "Separate Ways Together," when the chronotope no longer appears in the text, Smith tells of Mapplethorpe's career and his relationship with Sam Wagstaff, writing, "The undying affection between Robert and Sam has been produced, misshapen, and spat out in a

twisted version, perhaps interesting in a novel, but one cannot judge their relationship without an understanding of their consensual code” (234). She claims, “I saw them as two men who had a bond that could not be severed. The affirmation that came from each strengthened them” (235). Here, Smith implies she is attempting to write over some of the negative portrayals of Mapplethorpe regarding his relationship with Wagstaff.

Additionally, throughout her text, she also explicitly re-writes some of the negative judgments that have been made regarding Mapplethorpe’s relationship with his photographic subjects. Her doing so, in turn, has brought *her* criticism. In her *Slate* article, Julia Felsenthal writes that she does not “doubt that Mapplethorpe was, in his way, incredibly supportive of Smith; his striking photographs of Smith for her album covers surely contributed in no small part to her success” (1). However, Felsenthal depicts Smith’s efforts to portray Mapplethorpe in a positive manner as a fault on Smith’s part. “Even 20 years after his death, Smith finds herself apologizing for his behavior” (1). Felsenthal argues, “given Mapplethorpe’s reputation as a narcissist—and remembering that his photographs have been called exploitative—it should come as no surprise that Mapplethorpe’s relationship with his first model might also be somewhat abusive” (1). I do not at all agree with Felsenthal’s criticism here. In *Just Kids*, Smith actively argues against views of Mapplethorpe as an abusive artist. Of course my claim does not preclude his actual abuse, given that there may have been some; Stockholm Syndrome does exist. However, Felsenthal assumes in her argument that the male abuses the female, and she does not call attention to the inverse function of her argument, that females can exploit males, too. Indeed, as Smith admits, *she put herself* in front of Mapplethorpe’s camera’s



gaze in order to benefit from the finished artistic product. About shooting the photo for the cover of her album *Horses*, she recalls,

There was never any question that Robert would take the portrait [...] We never talked about what we would do, or what it would look like. [...] I had my look in mind. He had his light in mind. That is all [...] Robert placed me [...] His hands trembled slightly as he readied to shoot. I stood [...] He said, "You know, I really like the whiteness of the shirt. Can you take the jacket off?" I flung my jacket over my shoulder, Frank Sinatra style. I was full of references. He was full of light and shadow [...] he showed me the contact sheet. "This one has the magic," he said. When I look at it now, I never see me. I see us (249-51)

Smith's artistic relationship with Mapplethorpe is not so much hierarchically bound to individual subject/object position roles as it is to existing on an egalitarian playing field in which both parties mutually benefit from the existence of the other. If one of them is abusing the other, they are both abusing each other. Their relationship as photographer and model seems more symbiotic than exploitative.

Smith speaks for other models whom Mapplethorpe photographed, too: "Robert was not a voyeur," she recalls (236). And she tells us, "[Robert] always said that he had to be authentically involved with the work that came out of his S&M pursuits [...] I admired him for it, but I could not comprehend the brutality. It was hard for me to match it with the boy I had met" (236). She immediately follows this statement with, "And yet when I look at Robert's work, his subjects are not saying, Sorry, I have my cock out. [Robert]'s not sorry and doesn't want anyone else to be. He wanted his subjects to be

pleased with his photographs [...] He wanted all his subjects to feel confident about their exchange” (236). In this passage, we should notice that Smith positions herself to express the opinion of all of Mapplethorpe’s photographic subjects. From this reading, we should see that Smith has “written” herself into Mapplethorpe’s art (and in turn, into his life story), and this argument’s converse function, that Mapplethorpe has “written” himself into Smith’s art and life story, is true, too. Smith suggests that in order to understand either of their bodies of work, audiences *need* to understand how very connected their work is; their work is, indeed, their “children” (274). That is, we can see Smith in Mapplethorpe’s work and Mapplethorpe’s work in Smith’s. As she recalls in the “Holding Hands with God” chapter, her late husband Fred “Sonic” Smith once told her, “I don’t know how [Mapplethorpe] does it, but all of his photographs of you look like him” (273).

In turn, in *Just Kids* we have an example of Smith literally writing Mapplethorpe into her own text—and in this one, he looks like her. As a textual representation of Mapplethorpe that Smith has constructed, Mapplethorpe is cast in Smith’s image. And she *had* to do this. In order for her to become an autobiographical subject by creating herself as a network of selves—such as with the photographs, for instance—Smith *had* to tell Mapplethorpe’s story, too. As she writes in the book, “He was the artist of my life” (157). Smith this uses the photographs that she includes in the book as springboards that allow her to construct her own narrative discourse about her life—and, in turn, Mapplethorpe’s life. In essence, she constructs Mapplethorpe in her own image, and she re-focuses the negative representations that we have seen into an image of him as a child and as a young man who has not yet achieved any level of notoriety, who is perfecting his

aesthetic sensibilities and working to become an artist, and who, when he finally does become an artist, is not the casually exploitative figure he has been made out to be. In the end, she is, indeed, separate from him. “Why can’t I write something that would awake the dead?” Smith bemoans at the end of her book, “That pursuit is what burns most deeply” (278). She writes that she never “got over [...] the desire to produce a string of words more precious than the emeralds of Cortes,” that she never has been able to evoke Mapplethorpe in words so that he can once again be present in the flesh with her (278).

*Just Kids*, then, is Smith’s attempt at re-membering Mapplethorpe through language. She takes him, a dead subject, and re-creates him through language as a biographical figure who can again stand alongside her own, central, autobiographical self. She positions herself with him in a specific historical framework that manifests as the chronotope of the artistic frontier. And while he may become a “great” artist with her, he eventually dies, and she eventually expresses the pain of her separation from him. Indeed, it is this separation, and her desire to close the void that exists in it, that prompts her to write the book. But what we cannot deny is that Smith, despite all her efforts, sees herself as distanced from him, separate from him. He is her biographical subject, yes. But in order for him to become a biographical subject, she must first tell her story—which is separate from his—in which she becomes her own, “great” autobiographical subject.

Instead of composing a biography that depends on objectivity and academic scholarship, then, Smith composes one that is based upon her own subjectivity, or her autobiography. Using nothing more than her own subjectivity, she transgresses and defies the standard biographical image of Mapplethorpe and professes herself to be the one who can speak the truth about him—and, in turn, about herself. And by fusing together her

autobiography with Mapplethorpe's biography, Smith creates a memoir within which manifests the chronotope of the artistic frontier. And in blending the three discourses, she defies the masculinist structural tradition of these respective genres. di Prima simply replaced the "great man" from autobiography with herself. Smith, though, does not merely replace the "great man" from autobiography with herself, as she is a "great" woman because she has traversed the frontier and become an established artist. Within *Just Kids*, she also replaces the ancient male historian from the story of biography as the one who can speak the objective truth about a biographical subject. Smith, indeed, re-structures the gendered traditions of the life writing genres.

## CONCLUSION

### THE BEAST IN THE CORNER

With *Just Kids*, Patti Smith overturns traditional generic forms so that she can create something new from the fusion. Similarly, in his 1997 article “Patti Smith’s ‘Gloria’ Intertextual Play in a Rock Vocal Performance,” Mike Daley discusses the impact that the first song on Smith’s debut studio album, in which Smith “riffs” on Van Morrison’s original recording of “Gloria” by adding her own poetry into his song, has had on the recording industry since its release. As the “Godmother of Punk Rock” and an extremely influential player in recording industry history, immortalized in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, Smith actually helped trigger the legitimacy of punk rock as its own musical genre. Carrie Jaures Noland writes, “In her work of the mid-seventies, Patti Smith was establishing a hybrid genre she dubbed ‘rock poetry,’ which implicitly aligned the techniques of poetry with a socially deviant lifestyle [ . . . with] a great number of explicit intertextual references [ . . . emphasizing] the close relations between the high-cultural discourse of poetry and the angry rock style” (587). I believe she is doing something similar with life writing.

Daley also argues that “Morrison’s original lyrics reveal a loosely constituted first-person narrative centering on what is ostensibly the singer’s sexual conquest of Gloria [ . . . but a] closer look [ . . . ] suggests that it is Gloria who does the seducing, and that

the male protagonist is in fact passive as he voyeuristically watches his own seduction” (236-7). Smith’s version of the song, which includes new lyrics for the verses and “juxtapos[es] ‘Gloria’ with ‘Gloria in excelsis deo’ [...] fundamentally alters the signification of [Morrison’s song] for [Smith’s] immediate purposes” (236). Daley continues, arguing that “Smith’s interpretation of ‘Gloria’ plays on this ambiguous gender coding, using Morrison’s passive male character as a springboard for a more powerful protagonist of vague gender, who retains responsibility and agency [...] and] the Gloria character becomes more metaphorical in Smith’s hands (236-8). Ultimately, Daley claims, Smith “decenter[s] the dominant male rock singer [and] opens a space for herself (and, as history would have it, a procession of other women) as a rock artist [... she expresses] the freedom to play and to transgress boundaries: boundaries, of gender, music, discourse” (239).

Smith treats life writing in a manner similar to the way in which she has historically treated music. In her book *Just Kids*, Smith defies boundaries of “gender, [genres of writing], [and] discourse.” In short, Smith uses memoir in the “Just Kids” and “Hotel Chelsea” chapters in order to tell the story of how she and Mapplethorpe each became “great” artists in their own right. Through this portion of the book, we can identify a “time-space” that materializes and joins her book in intertextual dialogue with other works such as di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. This time space, as well as the intertextual dialogue that it brings, allows us to (as Bakhtin reminds us) work past our conceptions of genres that are too limiting to categorize her book within. The spatiotemporal plane of the artistic frontier as it manifests in di Prima and Smith’s works is unique in that it brings *women* to fame and “greatness,” certainly allowing them the

space within which to compose an authoritative piece of life writing. By inscribing herself as her own great autobiographical subject, di Prima challenges and transgresses the masculinist traditions of autobiography. As well, Smith inscribes herself as her own “great” autobiographical subject. She also composes a biography of Mapplethorpe. And when their autobiographical and biographical selves meet and coexist within what manifests as the chronotope of the artistic frontier, Smith composes a memoir. *Just Kids*, then, is a fusion of autobiography, biography, and memoir. And in turn, Smith re-structures the foundational elements of life writing so that they take the life of a “great” woman as their most basic feature. If the tradition of biography, the first life writing genre to develop, is such that a man writes the story of a man, here we have a woman composing a man’s story; in *Just Kids*, Smith offers readers an other as he looks from her female perspective. Smith, then, implies that the life writing genres can profess truth as it comes from a woman’s point of view. She suggests that women can become through writing, not the named, but the one who names.

Patti Smith uses *Just Kids* in order to write an autobiography of herself *within which* she can also write a biography of Mapplethorpe. Ultimately, then, she subverts the masculinist features of biography, and, by extension, the whole of life writing. Smith refuses to write a text that fits perfectly into generic categories as they are currently perceived. And she fuses together the three genres of life writing—biography, autobiography, and memoir—much in the same way that she fused together Van Morrison’s “Gloria” and her own poetry in the 1970s, and with much the same purpose: to create a new type of text.

That a new type of life writing exists—with its theoretical foundation grounded within the life of a woman instead of within the life of a man—should hardly be surprising to scholars. In their 1998 book *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that contemporary authors of life writing, which have included many women, have been “engaging the challenges posed by postmodernism’s deconstruction of any solid ground of selfhood and truth outside of discourse and by postcolonial theory’s troubling of established hierarchies of authority, tradition, and influence” (211). These writers, Smith and Watson argue, “[adapt] aspects of postmodern and postcolonial theory, which are themselves heterogenous rather than unified fields. They [consider] generic instability, regimes of truth telling, referentiality, relationality, and embodiment as issues that contest the assumptions of the earlier critical period’s understanding of canonical autobiography” (211). And, perhaps most importantly, contemporary authors of life writings “[expand] their range of life writing and the kinds of stories critics may engage in rethinking the field of life narrative” (211).

*Salon.com* writer Greg Villepique recalls that in the late ’70s and early ’80s, once punk counterculture had become mainstream and commercialized, Smith “was too much of a misfit for the misfits to embrace” (1). For all the transgressions Smith has made throughout her career, *Just Kids* may not seem, at first glance, like it comes from the same artist who screams “Well I don’t fuck much with the past,/ but I fuck plenty with the future [...] I have not sold myself to God” (“Babelogue”). The Patti Smith of *Just Kids* may not sound like the same Smith who sings, “Jesus Christ,/ was a nigger,/ nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger!” (“Rock N Roll Nigger”). Her book *did* win the National Book Award for Non-Fiction, causing some reviewers to say that she



had lost her transgressive edge and become mainstream. Desmond Traylor writes, “she is no longer exactly *Outside Society*” (1). However, Patti Smith is still a transgressive artist—even if, with *Just Kids*, what she may be transgressing most obviously is our own expectations of her.

On a more subdued, nuanced undercurrent, Patti Smith also transgresses the generic traditions of life writing. With *Just Kids*, she “[expands the] range of life writing and the kinds of stories critics may engage in rethinking the field of life narrative” (Smith and Watson 211). Just as she helped in creating punk rock, I believe Patti Smith is now, like Diane di Prima before her, helping in the creation of a new type of life writing which values the story of the life of a woman as its most basic feature. She and di Prima are, of course, not the only writers to compose a text like this. Another woman to win the National Book Award for Non-Fiction, Joan Didion, uses her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* to tell of her life after the death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne. Like Smith’s treatment of Mapplethorpe, Didion writes of her own life in order to grapple with and process Dunne’s death for herself. And of course not only females are enacting this shift in the landscape of life writing narrative.

As well, contemporary men’s life writing exhibits the rhetorical techniques that critics claim women have traditionally used to cast themselves into autobiographical molds. In his 2006 memoir *My Undoing*, gay porn star Aiden Shaw constructs his autobiographical self in a way resembling Gilmore’s argument that “women represent the self by representing others because that is how women know and experience identity” (xiii). Shaw divides a section called “Useless Man” into smaller portions with subheadings entitled “David’s Account,” “Marc’s Account,” and “Nina’s Account,” and

he writes of himself in the third person from each of these people's viewpoints while recalling his recovery from a car wreck that left him battling paralysis. He writes, "Aiden had been hit in the head and his brain was swollen. He couldn't move the left side of his body [...] I didn't recognize [him] as I walked into intensive care. He had a tube up his nose, bandages round his head, staples in his stomach, and an IV drip. Tubes led from him, one for piss, one for blood. Even so, it was a great relief to see him" (106). In order to tell this part of his life story, Shaw clearly grasps his own subjectivity by defining himself through others' perspectives

*Just Kids* cannot be categorized by any particular definition of "autobiography," "biography," or "memoir." It is a fusion of these genres, and can therefore be seen as a new type of genre altogether. Certainly other authors challenge the traditional, gender-specific practices of life writing; their works may also be inclusive of a new genre of life writing. So, instead of ignoring writers who are creating this new type of work, and instead of pretending this new kind of life writing doesn't exist, let's acknowledge it as the beast in the corner. We know it's over there, in the shadows, but we can't quite see anything but its form, and we don't quite yet know what it is. Perhaps we should shine some more light on other textual examples of it in order to discover even more of its features. And perhaps then, having engaged with the beast, we can see how it is *not* a beast, and it can become, instead, something we accept as its own, legitimate and canonical literary genre.

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